Interview with George S. Vest

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR GEORGE S. VEST

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: George, could you give a little idea of your background prior to entering the Foreign Service?

VEST: Very simply, my father was an Episcopal minister in Virginia, rural Virginia primarily. I grew up in an assortment of small towns in Virginia.

Q: You were born when?

VEST: Born in 1918. My father moved from Berryville, Virginia in the late 1920s to become the rector of Emmanuel Church in Alexandria. He came to Alexandria simply so that we could go to schools—my sister and I—that would make it possible for us to have a college education, because rural town schools did not prepare you for that back in the 1930s.

Q: And Virginia was one of the poorer states.

VEST: And Virginia was one of the poorer states. So we moved to Alexandria, where my sister and I did go to these schools. I went as a day student to a very fine prep school on the outskirts of Alexandria called Episcopal High School, where I had a scholarship which made it possible for me to go through there. I then went to the University of Virginia. Very

quickly after the first year, had scholarships and jobs which made it possible to work my way through college, which was not really that difficult in those days because there was the National Youth Administration which gave you jobs and supplemented with other kinds of activities.

After that I went into World War II, directly from the University of Virginia. First, I was drafted and sent to what had been the Bronx National Guard. This was my first experience with foreign environment. [Laughter]

Q: Well, this is really doing it the hard way.

VEST: But at the government's insistence I was there. Then after OCS, went overseas to England, North Africa, Italy. Was in Italy throughout World War II until the very end.

Q: Were you with a division

VEST: I was with corps artillery.

Q: Corps artillery.

VEST: After that, I came back. I had never planned to be in the Foreign Service. It had not been in my mind at all up until I was in the war. In fact, I had planned, more or less, to be a plant pathologist. I thought that's what I wanted to do. Plants fascinated me. Overseas in North Africa and in Italy, I began to see a whole series of other things in life, other problems, other possibilities. So, as soon as I came back, I took the Foreign Service exam.

Q: How had you heard about the Foreign Service exam?

VEST: I have no idea. I do not remember how I heard about it. [Laughter] I only know I knew about it. I did it, like a lot of people. I had absolutely not a penny to my name other than a few war bonds I had been made to buy during the war as punishment for infractions of one kind or another. I went back to the University of Virginia. It was on the speeded-up,

12-month course. Worked on a master's degree in history, which was related to my new interest in international affairs. As, frankly, an alternative if I didn't pass the exam, I would have a master's degree which would help me get a teaching job somewhere.

Q: Well, coming from your background, did you have any concern that this was a moneyed organization—the Foreign Service—and that you really had to have money?

VEST: No, it's very interesting, and it possibly is the result of having been raised as a preacher's son. Whether or not a person had money never seemed to bother me by the time I at least was grown up. I know. When I told several friends at the University of Virginia, they were astonished and said, “Oh, but you have to be rich to ever go anywhere.” One wonderful old woman, a Mrs. Marshall, whose family were well connected with very wealthy people in Philadelphia whose distant relatives had been ambassadors or in the Foreign Service and whose children were friends of mine and she had been more or less almost an adopted god-parent sort of person. I would visit her from time to time. And Mrs. Marshall warned me. She said, “I don't think you should do this. You can never go anywhere if you don't have money and a private income.” She also knew that I was courting a very wonderful person who had no money as well, and so it meant I was breaking both rules. I had no money and I had no intention of marrying money. And she said, “I don't think you can do it.”

Well, of course, in the pre-1946 Act period, she was right. I wasn't being pressured in that period—because this was '46, 47—I just had that insouciance that youth has, I suppose. [Laughter]

Q: What the hell?

VEST: That somehow I can do it because others are going to do it. It's the post World War II period; we're all going to do things.

Q: And with the GI Bill and all, I mean, the world was sort of opening up to a whole generation.

VEST: Yes, because I was going back on the GI Bill.

Q: Well now, how did one get into the Foreign Service? We're talking about 1946, 47. How did you get in?

VEST: I did the following. I talked to people who had taken the exam—but they had failed the exam, but they described the exam—and I happened to find two people in graduate school with me there. This was the winter of '46, '47, late '46, who were studying with a special course here in Washington, in Georgetown, Franklin Raudebush. And they would come up and go to cram courses with Franklin Raudebush and then they'd come back and they would show me the kind of things he was making them study. So I studied on my own. It was as simple as that.

I was taking history. I had a very good background in English from undergraduate years. I did get some separate books and read economics in an effort to be able to deal with that portion of the exam that was so touted at that period. I had studied some Spanish before the war, and I got a dictionary, and as I remember, used to read from time to time in a Puerto Rican newspaper, which I could get through the University of Virginia library, and I read the New York Times and Time Magazine. It sounds very simple. I did it all on my own.

Q: But this is normal. You hit the right key. Was it a three and a half day exam, or for military, was there a shortened one?

VEST: It's very vague, Stu, and I'm not that certain. I don't believe it was a three and a half day exam.

Q: I think there was a sort of a catch up because of the military. I took it in '53 and it was three and a half days, but I think, when things were settling down, prior to that, I think there was a desire to get military people.

VEST: It was a long exam. It wasn't just a short exam. It was a long exam, is all I remember about it, but I have a feeling that it was all done in one day.

Q: It may well have been.

VEST: All day long. And the thing I remember about it was that we did have, I think, a five-point bonus they were prepared to give you if you had served in the war. So I knew that when I went in, I would get a five-point bonus. This exam did have all of the major areas I was referring to, including a section on international law, which I tackled truly from the point of common sense, which may be the worst way to consider law. [Laughter] That is the way I took it, in any case.

Q: Well now, the oral exam. Did you have an oral exam?

VEST: Yes.

Q: And how did that go?

VEST: Oral exam was a very different thing from what we have today. First, you waited some months—and we were certainly in a speeded-up period because, instead of a year and a half to two years, I took that exam, as I recall, in the fall of '46. I graduated, got my master's, and got married in June of '47, and it was midsummer '47, I was offered an appointment. So the process was faster.

Now, the oral exam. The oral exam, we were told to come to Washington. Maybe elsewhere, they were going to other places. I was in Virginia.

Q: I think they were pretty much in Washington to control expense.

VEST: I was told to come to Washington. There were a number of us there. Most of us, in fact everybody I talked to as we were waiting, was an ex-GI. There were no women and there were no minorities in that group that I saw there. We all, that I talked to, had master's degrees. It was interesting—or were aspirants for—expecting to get—a master's degree. We were told we would have approximately anywhere from a half hour to an hour interview, and at the end of that, we would be told whether we had passed the oral. I, of course, was still studying for my master's.

The boy who went before me, I still remember, had a master's degree in history from Yale, and he went in and came out. And then there was an interval, and I asked him, “What was it like?” He said, “They asked me everything that I knew nothing about. They asked me nothing about the things I knew something about.” And that was it.

So I went in, and it was exactly the same. There was a panel, as I remember, I believe of five people. If I'm not mistaken, the center person was someone, I think, a colonel on leave from the Air Force, it's my vague memory. Just as I had been told, they invited you to sit down, and in these smoke- free days, they invited you to be relaxed, have a cigarette if you'd like. I had never smoked in my life. I had tried smoking the night before so I would be able to appear nonchalant. [Laughter] Coughed terribly, and realized that was one area I was going to fail. So I responded to this invitation to kindly sit down and have a smoke. I sort of sharply rapped out, “I don't smoke,” illustrating how ill at ease I was. [Laughter]

They proceeded to ask a few questions of one kind or another, and pretty soon went off into areas that really were areas you just did not know. My questions practically all concentrated on national trade and national commerce and what I'd call practical economics. And I was questioned at length about the shoe industry of the United States and ranching and cattle and the leather tanning industries of the United States, and we went through every kind of thing like this. And I was left to decide, “How do you deal with

the unknown?" I could see this is what they had chosen to do. They knew my record, and they chose to do this. So it was a constant choice between acknowledging what you didn't know, or attempting to use your common sense to see how far you could go, and this is what it was clearly all about.

Then there were one or two—still one memorable one which I don't remember the exact detail—but there was a man there from the Department of Labor who looked like Justice Felix Frankfurter. He sat at the left end, and I can still remember. He rapped out a question and said, "Mr. Vest, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that the continuity of history is not a choice, but a duty. Comment."

And I thought to myself, "What in the world? What does it mean?" So I finally said, "I really don't know, unless he was thinking about the DARs."

At which the other members laughed, and he said, rather sourly, "Not what he had in mind." [Laughter] I still don't know what he had in mind.

Q: I don't either. I was just trying to figure out how I would handle that, and I just don't know.

VEST: I do realize when I look back on that one, for example, that along with the other two qualities which I brought to the oral exam, I frankly decided that humor is what you have to use in some hopeless situations, and I obviously did do it.

I came out of that and waited for about 15 minutes, and then they came out and said, "Okay, you passed the oral exam." So that was how it was done then.

Q: Was there a class when you came in, or were you just sort of an entry replacement?

VEST: No, there was a class. I came in in that group, it would be about September 1947. We were all former GIs. There were 40-some of us, one woman, and a very capable and nice person she was. We had all served in the war. We were a very diverse group

of people, but we came from all over the country. The kind of people who would be smoothies from the northeast Ivy League world; to a rancher, whom I can still remember from the far Middle West; a guy who had worked in a factory in Chicago; and a very wealthy man who owned, I gather, hundreds, maybe thousands, of acres down around Arkansas and Texas and so on. We were from all of these backgrounds.

Q: So this was not a matter of the eastern establishment reasserting itself?

VEST: It was, as far as I was concerned, my class, at least, was the living example of the fact that it was going to be a new Foreign Service. And from the point of view of the senior officers, we were, believe me. We were a new Foreign Service. We were all, in varying ways, inadequately trained by background. We all had the maturing experience of the war, and we had all come to this late in terms of a decision that this is what we wanted to do. We came to it as a result, primarily, of our wartime maturing experiences.

We had, I don't remember how many weeks, we were in a group. We were headed up and sort of supervised by a very fine senior Foreign Service officer, Mr. Lawrence Taylor, as I remember. It wasn't the A-100 course of today. Once somebody came and gave us an hour's lecture and said, “This is the pouch.” [Chuckles] Another one came for an hour or two and said, “This is consular affairs, and when you have a problem, these are the books you look things up in.” Everything was very, very rapid, and there was no question about the rapidity of it.

Q: Oh, still probably an offshoot of the military experience where we were all used to getting in and getting on to it. You say, “Invade what country, when?” and get about it.

VEST: It was one thing we hear an awful lot of stuff about, bonding and teams and so on. It was very interesting. We were not there very long together, and yet we formed a group that have never forgotten each other. Our wives got to know each other, and we have kept up to this day. I was the last of the war group to retire. We had, about a year ago, a

reunion, and people came from great distances. We all got together again, so that little first experience still was a bonding experience.

Q: Well, your first post was you went to Hamilton, Bermuda. Is that right?

VEST: Yes.

Q: You were there from 1947 to '49. I'm going to concentrate more on the latter part of your career, but here was what might seem to be the ideal assignment. In fact, almost too ideal. I know when I came into the Foreign Service, somebody asked me what I'd like to be and I said, "Oh, I'd like to be an ambassador." But I was thinking underneath, "Consul general of Bermuda really sounds like a nice place to be." I didn't know anything about it. Was this a positive experience or not?

VEST: Stu, I'd have to say it was—I don't know how to describe it, but I'd have to just talk a little bit about it because it was one of the most important experiences I had in the Foreign Service.

My wife and I had only been married that June. We went there in September to Bermuda. The people were as friendly as could be, and then it's a beautiful place and all the rest. It's the only extremely disagreeable, difficult post I've ever had in my Foreign Service. Now, why? I show my prejudice here. I very much disliked the consul, and I think he deserved my dislike. Very firmly, without going into details, he was a man of another generation, so extraordinary that in our regular Foreign Service world, it could never have happened. This is the case of someone left over during a wartime. And, without going into details, he was very difficult.

Q: Could you give some illustration of what the problem was?

VEST: Okay, a couple of illustrations. He was very old school, and, for example, the secretaries were a group of nice, young women. And one day, for example, he came to

the door of his office—they were in a pool right there in front of him—and he said to me, “Mr. Vest, I can't think what's happening to the Foreign Service. Look at those young women. There is Olson, dumb Swede.” Miss Olson was sitting there. “Geisweit, dirty German; Jerzack, stupid Pole.” He went right on through, and every one of those young women could hear what he was saying about them. I mean, this is a very oddball. That just illustrates the kind of prejudice that went on inside that man.

This was still a period when black-white relationships were very sensitive and uncertain in our own country, and certainly very delicate in Bermuda. But his instructions were very clear. Never issue a visa to a black Bermudian without checking it out and getting the proper permission from the white Bermudian who really keeps an eye on him. But I didn't feel I could really live that way.

There were many, many things like that. This was an oddity of life. His wife was a former fortuneteller, and she would look at the stars in the night and tell him what he was to look out for the next morning. He would come in the morning and call me up and say, “Mr. Vest, I don't want to speak to any dirty foreigners today.” Well, it's hard to be the consul general and not speak to foreigners. [Laughter] It was weird, and the office was just a hot bed of anxiety and hostility.

The secretaries did not speak to each other. He had managed to have his former secretary made into a vice consul, and he tended to try to run everything through her. He alienated her at some point, and then she was a very fair colleague for me as a new vice consul. He never gave me any instructions. He waited until each time I made a mistake and then he noted it down, and once a month at the beginning of the month, he sent in a confidential report on all of my inadequacies and mistakes. The reason I knew about it was this other vice consul, who had come to like me, quietly showed them to me. So once a month I knew that every mistake I made was being sent to the Department of State. [Chuckles] It was a totally hostile environment, and my wife and I had a challenge. We were not sure to what extent this was really like the Foreign Service.

Q: And you really didn't have much of a chance there. You were fairly isolated to compare people with other people.

VEST: We had no basis of comparison. In fact, a couple of senior Foreign Service officers came down and lived with the consul, who had a quarter of a million dollar official residence. They lived in the guest house and they came in to see me. They more or less said you're going to have to learn to do things the way the consul general wants them done, or you can never go ahead in the Foreign Service. Well, I wasn't about to do things the way the consul general wanted them. I hadn't fought World War II to live that way, nor had my wife and I, who had very strong backgrounds. My father was a minister and her father was a former Presbyterian missionary in China who had become the librarian at the University of Virginia and also taught at Princeton. I mean, our parents didn't raise us to give way on certain fundamental principles.

In the end, the situation exploded, and the director general—my first experience with the director general—one day got off the plane and refused to stay with the consul general, stayed in a hotel, interviewed every single person in the office. And at the end, told the consul general, “You will leave within two months to go to another post.”

The consul general's unreality was shown in the fact he said, “I've always wanted to be ambassador to New Zealand.” Then the word came, he was sent to be the consul in Gibraltar, with one person working for him. So, obviously, they'd gotten the picture of this man back in Washington, which later I learned from John Burns, a subsequent director general, who told me he had been working on British colonial possessions and they were very well aware that something was wrong, but they didn't know what.

I was then told I would leave later, and I stayed on for oh, maybe, five months more. And the director general said, “And you were not a positive factor in a very difficult situation”—which I think was quite true—”and you will be sent to a hardship post and we'll see what

it is. Normally, we'd select you out, but under the rules, you're entitled to be reviewed and judged by another senior officer."

So then my wife and I were sent in '49 to Quito, Ecuador, which we loved. [Chuckles] That was our punishment. But the real thing was, we were terribly fortunate. Our difficult post was our first post. I had the kind of backing from her and we had the kind of background which made us survive it and be quite ready that we were going to live by our standards and what we thought someone should do when they represented our country regardless. And if you couldn't stay in the Foreign Service doing it that way, we'd get out. Well, it was sort of the first time when I was prepared to quit, and periodically in life, you have to be prepared to quit.

Q: Well, what about in Quito? This was a positive experience?

VEST: It was a great experience. It was very simple. I worked then for Ambassador Jack Simmons and his wife, Caroline Simmons, two of the most marvelous human beings you could have. They were simply wonderful to us. And I can still remember the two of them came—we invited them to come and have supper in the little house we lived in—and Ambassador Simmons said to me, "George, have you ever looked at your file in Washington? Because when you leave a post, you know, you can see what's been on your file." And he had just come back from Washington.

And I said, "No. When I came through Washington, I didn't bother to look in my file."

He said, "Well, you know, you have just about the worst file of any junior officer I've ever known." Which I knew was no surprise. [Laughter] He was a wonderfully engaging man. He said, "But we are going to do something about that." [Laughter] He was a great boss. Maury Bernbaum was his deputy, who was a wonderfully kind, thoughtful number two.

Q: Later ambassador to...

VEST: Later ambassador in Venezuela.

Q: Venezuela and Ecuador.

VEST: And Ecuador. And between the Simmons and the Bernbaums, we just had wonderful opportunities. As they did in those days, I worked in the consular section, I worked with the USIA on the side, which was then part of the regular Foreign Service, as did my wife. I worked in the economics section. You know, I just was given every break.

Q: So this was your time to blossom out?

VEST: They had been without an administrative officer for almost nine months. So for my first six months I did that, until they got in, finally, an administrative officer. So I had a chance to do everything.

Q: You obviously got your second chance, and also the real opportunity to show what you could do. Then you went to Ottawa. This was from 1951 to '54. What were you doing there?

VEST: In Ottawa, I really had my break. It certainly was a break to go and work for the Simmons. I had a chance to sort of catch up. In Ottawa, I was the junior boy in the political section. Now, initially there wasn't a whole lot to do. My wife and I enjoyed the team, enjoyed everybody there. In fact, it may be worth just noting how I happened to go to Ottawa, because that's how they can do things in personnel.

Point of fact, when I was due to leave Quito, I was assigned to go to the Dominican Republic. In other words, there was a rational trend, and they were going to run you through several posts in an area. We spent what little savings we had and bought some tropical clothes in Washington while I was there in an interim for a little course.

Q: S.S. Schwartz?

VEST: Well, yes. S.S. Schwartz and anything else.

Q: In Baltimore, yes.

VEST: We were prepared to go. But I did go into the personnel people, who were not Foreign Service; they were civil service covering the area. And I said, “Now I'm prepared to go, but I think you should know something. And that is that my closest friend in Ecuador was Juan Alfonseca, whose father is a major exile who claims he ought to be the president of the Dominican Republic and probably one of the people most hated by Trujillo. Everybody in Quito knew that the Alfonsecas were our closest friends, practically. So I just want you to know that.”

That went like a lead bullet into personnel, and the next thing I knew, I was told I was being sent to Canada. [Laughter] Just one of those, again, quirks of fate we live with. So we took our tropical wardrobe and went to Canada.

Before Canada, for the first year, I had not done political reporting. I had not done any of that kind of activity. In Ottawa I had, again, good training. I was trained by a wonderful political counselor named Jack Morgan, who just was a superb man, and a great DCM named Don Bliss, who later was ambassador to Ethiopia. Mr. Bliss had come in through the commercial service, so he had a very strong sense of what I'd call the economic side of things, and Jack Morgan was the traditional or what I'd call political purist officer. I was constantly sort of being pushed or invited by one or the other to do things. Couldn't have been a nicer kind of training. They were the best representatives of the old Foreign Service we could have encountered, I don't think I could have found a better pair then they were, the two senior officers.

They gave me, as a portfolio to follow, what was considered a dead subject at the time. They said, “You follow this and get to know everybody involved in this area.” It was called the St. Lawrence Seaway. And I got to know the engineers, and it was one of those

cases where no one thought much was ever going to happen. In the end probably the Canadians would build their own seaway, because they were determined to do so. But it was wonderful fun. I got to know every single person I could. It was a case of you may never be able to do anything in it, but here is a pond. You can paddle it, and I paddled as madly as I could.

And then Eisenhower got elected, and he passed the Wiley-Dondero Act that would call for a joint American-Canadian St. Lawrence Seaway. And I will never forget the DCM called me in, Mr. Bliss, and said, “Now, George, there are those who would like to take over this activity and feel they should take this activity over now that it is going to be a high-class negotiation, of top concern to everybody. But you have been involved in it and you know all the people in it, so I'm going to leave you responsible for this negotiation.” That was what I would call the real break of all times.

And that meant that the people down the Bureau of European Affairs knew that I was negotiating it. The people in the Defense Department knew it because the Defense Department was ostensibly in charge of the whole thing.

Q: Corps of Engineers and all.

VEST: Corps of Engineers.

Q: Like the highway program, all of which had a defense underline.

VEST: You had the states of Illinois and Michigan and New York and the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, everybody had a hand in it.

Well, I was left to do that. I began the negotiations and did a good portion of the negotiations. I got to know everybody as a result of it, including Livy Merchant, who was the assistant secretary for European affairs. That was another break.

Q: George, later you had a great deal of experience with NATO, and, of course, Canada is often forgotten, but it a member of NATO. We're talking about the early '50s. What was our attitude at the embassy and through the State Department, and maybe your attitude, too, towards Canada? The Canadians talk more about how Americans...

VEST: Take them for granted.

Q: Take them for granted, but how did we look at Canada at that time, would you say?

VEST: Let's divide the we. The embassy first.

The embassy was a very high-spirited, strong morale group, and it took Canada very seriously. Everybody was impressed with what Canada could do or would probably do, and this went all the way through. It wasn't a big embassy. It was a wonderful group. The military were impressed with what the Canadians were doing in the far north and what they were cooperating with our military on. The agriculture attach# thought Canada was one of the greatest things in the world and was going to be one of the breadbaskets of the future. They were building the trans-Canadian pipeline. It doesn't matter what area you were in, for those who worked with them, this was one of the great periods of Canada. I mean, the prime minister was Louis St. Laurent; the foreign minister, external affairs minister, was Mike Pearson; the man in charge of the economy was a great old man named C.D. Howe. These people were tremendous leaders, very important, and they knew everybody in Washington and in New York and in Chicago. It was a very interesting time.

So, in the work terms and in the embassies—down to their embassy in Washington, and ours up in Ottawa—it was a period of tremendous appreciation. If you went outside that, to some extent to the other areas of the U.S. Government, to elsewhere in the country, there was a general attitude of, well, Canada is a splendid place and the Canadians are splendid people and they're particularly splendid because they're so nearly like us. And there was a considerable atmosphere of taking Canada for granted. Even when the Canadians sat

down and said, “We're going to negotiate and have a joint Canadian seaway, and we're going to do it our way. We're not going to expose any of our citizens traveling on that joint Canadian seaway to McCarthyism or anything like that.” They were very forthright and strong on this. But even so, to the Americans at large, there was that attitude.

Q: How did you find the Canadians as negotiators? I've talked to somebody who is on our negotiating team—on the last couple of years, we've just had basically a free trade pact with Canada—and said the Canadians were able to play the “You don't understand us, and we're a little country” to a fare-thee-well and that they're some of the toughest negotiators you could imagine. How did you find them in the '50s?

VEST: That is exactly the way they were then. There is no strength like the strength of a weaker neighbor dealing with a relatively moral, strong neighbor. They played the weaker neighbor. They would play the fact that their Constitution was weaker than ours where they had a very bad— they always used to claim that, you know, if we have a problem, well, “the provinces won't let us do that.” And, boy, we got the provinces rammed down our throat over and over. Not that it wasn't true up to a point, but they used it. They are very, very tough, able negotiators, and they're just as your other friend described it. That's the way they were then. [Laughter]

I will say this—and I've done a lot of negotiations since- -they were tremendously fair and honorable negotiators. There is something special about the Canadians which you cannot transpose to many other situations, and that is at a point where we would appear to face irreconcilable difference over something, the Canadians were people you could sit down with over a cup of coffee or a beer and talk and say, “Now come on. We've got to find our way through all this.” They have a nice genius for knowing when to move on from total hard-line position to search for a compromise that's palatable to both sides, and they showed it many times.

McCarthyism was a case in point, and they were very, very insistent to protect their citizens. But they found a way, and they started very hard and emotional about it that they would not expose people traveling on the seaways—their people—in any way. In the end we found a working compromise, which, again, was something that they found as the last resort. Oh, I have a great respect for them.

Q: George, you mentioned McCarthyism. You might, for the uninitiated, explain why McCarthyism would be a problem. But also, you came into the Foreign Service at a time when McCarthyism was rampant, although you were overseas most of this time. What was your impression at the time, and what did it mean to the Foreign Service that you saw?

VEST: Okay. I came in just ahead of McCarthyism, and McCarthyism got well underway shortly thereafter. It did not really impact on me until I got to Canada. Quito was so far away. It is best illustrated by the fact that there was no airplane line that went directly there from outside the country. It had dirt runways, and it never had a congressional visit. [Laughter] That describes Quito, as left to itself.

Canada was very different, indeed. We had not been in Canada very long before we began to hear the horror stories. People we knew who were being accused of all kinds of things which we felt could hardly be true. In fact, we were confident they weren't true. People we knew who were leaving the Foreign Service because of this particular kind of thing. And then it hit home when my wife's cousin, who had been raised in China and was a very fine scholar in that area, was hounded out of his—he was a professor in the United States—was hounded out of his job and got a job promptly at the University of Toronto, where they were delighted to have him. His only sin had been that, like most China scholars of that period, they had worked with people who were under accusation for one reason or another because, if they were good, they had had some contact with the changing China scene.

It hit me with real force in two episodes. First one was a story in which Scott McLeod in the State Department, who was then head of the security bureau and a great buddy of McCarthy's, questioned whether or not we should be reading magazines like the Reporter.

Q: This is a moderate left wing, very slightly left wing.

VEST: I was just going to say very slightly left wing. And this was carried in a little letter to the New York Times magazine section. So I wrote to the Foreign Service Journal. And wrote them a letter, which I invited them to publish, which said that I had subscribed to a wide selection of magazines and felt that, as a Foreign Service officer, I should, and that it included the Reporter and the Atlantic Monthly, both of which were allegedly viewed with some suspicion by Mr. McLeod. And that I thought that we in the Foreign Service should be told whether or not in the Foreign Service this was the kind of conduct that was approved or not.Very interesting. The Foreign Service Journal carefully wrote me right back and said, “We're going to publish your letter, and we will forward it to Mr. McLeod's office, the text, but we are withdrawing your name because we think it might be too controversial.”

Q: It gives an idea of the era.

VEST: That gives you an idea of the era. In point of fact, McLeod did come back and say, “No, the New York Times magazine was wrong. We don't disapprove of Foreign Service officers subscribing to a broad range of magazines. We do think they should be very careful that they are not seduced by ultra liberal propaganda.” [Laughter] And my name did not appear. It made me realize then, you know, how sensitive it was.

It reached the stage where I was reporting on Canadian attitudes to McCarthyism, and the telegram went to the ambassador, who was a political appointee—a very nice old gentlemen named R. Douglas Stewart—to be approved, and he was very upset. He called

me in and he said, “I'm not going to approve this kind of thing.” He very much favored what Senator McCarthy was doing, thought he was doing the right thing, and this was terrible.

Now I'll have the say that Ambassador Stewart was always very nice to me, and I never felt he held anything against me. I watched how things could be done. This DCM, Mr. Bliss, got into the middle of it and said to the ambassador, “Well, I understand how you feel about this, but George is only reporting Canadian attitudes so that the United States Government will know how things are viewed in Canada and can affect their conduct of policy. But you don't want to have your name on this as approving it. In the future, any telegrams that are reporting on McCarthyism and whatnot, why don't I just have them held until after you've gone home, and I will initial them.” The ambassador was very nice and agreed to this compromise that all telegrams on McCarthyism would come after he went home. [Laughter]

We followed it. We got more and more stories. I don't mind admitting it made a big impact on my wife and me, and it reached the stage when it hit relatives and friends enough that we seriously had a discussion saying, “Look. If this goes on and unchecked, and we find it impossible to be in the Foreign Service, we might just possibly immigrate to Canada.” Because I had this feeling if I wanted to, I could go there and I could, indeed, serve—I would have felt comfortable serving in the Canadian Foreign Service, and I felt I knew enough people that it was a conceivable thing. That was only casual talk between us and never got further than that. And then, of course, Eisenhower and the Senate and all the rest just gradually took care of all this.

Q: Well, George, I came into the Foreign Service in 1955. I'm not sure if I'm speaking for everybody, but I think this was the attitude. If things got rough on reporting or something, you could not depend on the State Department to back you up. This was a reflection of how we felt about Dulles.

VEST: That's exactly right. That's why I mentioned that DCM, because we did not have confidence in the State Department. We did have McLeod coming out and acting as he did. We didn't see anybody in the State Department reining him in, and we knew our senior Foreign Service officers were terribly worried. You could tell. It permeated the building. This was why I really was so impressed with the action of that DCM saying, “We have to do this reporting, and I will initial it if you don't want to do it.” But I was in the lucky position in that the senior officers in the embassy were of such a kind that I was fundamentally inspired by them. They provided leadership.

Q: I'm sure if somebody were to go back and to take a look in our reporting for that period, they would find a great many of the embassies did not report on the reaction to McCarthyism, which was a major issue which obviously should have been reported if you're doing your job. But because of this, this lack of trust.

VEST: Ours was the DCM. He was a rock. He was a Vermonter and he was all those things you think of in Vermont. There were two or three junior officers there. The junior officers who worked through that embassy were Phil Habib, Dean Brown, and I, in succession, so we had a pretty good crowd. I followed Dean there, and I remember one of them—I don't know which one it was—saying of Mr. Bliss, he said, “Well, he's a Vermonter. You get the satisfaction of working for him because on your efficiency report, if he says, 'Well done,' it means that you're a superman. He's never going to go beyond well done.” [Laughter]

Q: Well, George, you then went back to the State Department from 1954 to '57. What were you doing?

VEST: This was an actual continuation. They needed someone in the Canadian desk, and I was brought down. And primarily I did the St. Lawrence Seaway and all of the boundary waters problems of U.S.-Canada and the political coverage for the desk in Washington. In other words, I just took the other end of the stick. And this was again wonderful because

the Seaway was inherently the province of the Pentagon and the assistant secretary for European affairs, Livy Merchant, so I dealt almost directly with these very senior people. And right down there as a junior boy in the crowd because the Canadian desk was not high on the noble pecking order of European affairs. [Laughter] We had one that was lower, and that was the desk officer for Australia-New Zealand. They had even less credit. [Laughter]

Q: And no Seaway.

VEST: But I had the Seaway, and it was wonderful. And I had a great boss again. I owe so much to the great bosses I had. The head of that office was Outerbridge Horsey, and I don't think I've known anybody who was a better boss, taught me more, and drove home something that I didn't need, but I valued, which was what I'd call the importance of integrity and standards and all the rest. I can to this day remember the day Outerbridge—Outer, as we called him—got in all of us in the Canadian desk. There were about five or six of us. He said, “There are a lot of questions that come to us at one time or another from the press, sometimes you have to deal with the press. And just in general to all of you, I want you to know that for the future in your Foreign Service careers, you don't ever lie to the press. You may not answer a question, but don't ever, ever fall into the deliberate lie.” That was at a time when there was many questions about how do you conduct yourself, and I've never forgotten him to this day.

Q: This, I think, is probably the one thing that is almost engraved on anybody in the Foreign Service at a certain point. That when you start, if you lie, you've ruined yourself.

VEST: You get caught.

Q: Yes, you get caught, and then it ruins your business. Which is not a lesson, I might add, has not been learned by many of our administrations that have come in.

VEST: Oh, boy. [Laughter]

Q: Well, then we can move on. I have you in State until 1957 and then there's sort of a blank until 1959.

VEST: What happened, Stu, and probably I'm going into too much detail, but it illustrates the happenstance of our career. When people say they can plan your career, don't kid yourself. [Chuckles] At least mine is the absolute example of how little planning you can do.

I was the Canadian desk. In those days, the Canadian desk in the midsummer was very, very quiet. I ran into the staff assistant to the assistant secretary, Toby Belcher, and he was looking very glum. I said, “Toby, what's the matter?”

He said, “Well, I was going to take a vacation, but the guy who was going to fill in for me is suddenly gone off on a gourmet tour of France. I have no one to fill in for me, and now I can't take a vacation.”

I said, “Well, look. I can fill in for you and do my work in the Canadian desk at the same time because nobody's doing anything in Canada. They're all off in their little lakeside cabins.” So I went up and filled in for almost three weeks for him as the staff assistant.

In those days, there was only one staff assistant. He did everything for the assistant secretary and the deputies, and I did them for Assistant Secretary Elbrick, and then Toby came back.

Q: Was it Burke Elbrick

VEST: It was Burke Elbrick. Toby came back from his vacation and I went back to working on the St. Lawrence Seaway and so on. And about two months later, Toby got a chance to go off and be the consul general in Cyprus, and suddenly, they were looking for another staff assistant. Obviously, they looked around and said, “Well, get the guy who did it this

summer. He knows what to do and he can move right away." So I moved suddenly and became for a year the staff assistant to Burke Elbrick.

Q: I wonder. Burke Elbrick is one of my favorite people. He was my ambassador in Yugoslavia. I've always considered him a very professional diplomat, and could you describe how he operated and what he was doing?

VEST: He, for me, was the epitome. When we talk about the old Foreign Service, there are those I didn't care for at all. But in many ways for me, Burke Elbrick and his wife...

Q: Elfie.

VEST: Elfie. Burke and Elfie epitomize the best of the old Foreign Service. Totally well-organized. He trained me right away to know what to look for. When I look at today's world of telegrams, he had me going through everything and there would be no more than, normally, about eight to ten telegrams, and that's what he wanted on his desk when he came in. Because he came in and then they all went—the geographic assistant secretaries—for the early morning meeting with Secretary Dulles.

Q: And he was the geographic for the EUR?

VEST: He was the one for the European Bureau.

He had them all there. And he trained me what he wanted, and I was able to do it. He was the most impeccably courteous man, as well as organized. I don't think, in the whole year and plus that I worked with him, that I ever had the slightest harsh word from him. And yet there were times when I really did not do things as well as I should for him. But he didn't criticize openly, is all I can say. I would know where I'd failed. I suppose he knew I knew, but he had self control beyond belief, as far as I was concerned, because Mr. Dulles was a very demanding man.

Q: Could you talk a little about from your point of view—and we're talking about 1957 to '58. How did the European Bureau weigh in within the State Department with Dulles and all. Was this our prime concern, or how did you feel?

VEST: In those days, the assistant secretary every day was in direct contact with the secretary or the deputy secretary, more often the secretary. It just happened. Every day he was involved with him, not just the early morning meeting, which I can't remember whether it was 7:15 or when it was, but he was up there two or three times a day. Now these were days of great change in Europe of NATO under construct, of the Supreme Allied Commander, building SHAPE, of an uncertain political situation inside France, of difficulties with England over Suez. You can see there were lots of things to talk about, but I just know that every day he was up there.

Now, he worked terribly closely with his deputies, and his deputies were all Foreign Service officers, experienced Foreign Service officers like Jake Beam and John Wesley Jones and so on. It was equally clear when he wasn't around, any one of those deputies went up and felt perfectly comfortable in dealing and discussing issues with Secretary Dulles. So for all of his reputation for a bear of sorts, certainly Mr. Dulles was dealing terribly closely with those geographic bureau representatives that he had there, who were all Foreign Service people.

Q: I'm not sure this is exactly the place to play compare and contrast, but it does seem that, under Eisenhower and Dulles— they obviously were men of very strong opinions on how the world should be—the Foreign Service was a tool which they used as opposed to lately what you do is you interlard a political element in there so that decision making often is removed from the professionals. I think John Kennedy started some of this.

VEST: No question that there's a great difference. I look back on the Dulles period, and while Mr. Dulles was not a warm, congenial human being by any manner of means, he and Eisenhower used the Foreign Service. You can go back to that period. I don't have my

statistics, but the picture of the team that operated there under Eisenhower and Dulles is primarily Foreign Service. There was one outstanding, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Walter Robertson, who was not Foreign Service, but he's the only one. All the others were Foreign Service.

Q: The Counselor of embassy was Douglas MacArthur, who was brought in by Eisenhower who had known him as his political advisor at SHAPE, to make sure that there was a professional right there.

VEST: That's right. Now this was characteristic, and I will tell you also, it was the easiest thing in the world to be in touch with the people in the White House. You may have had the vestigial activity, which is now called the NSC, there, and you did work with them. But I cannot tell you how many times I went straight to Colonel Goodpaster, who worked for Sherman Adams as his deputy.

Q: Who was Eisenhower's Chief of Staff.

VEST: Chief of Staff. And I would be told, “Take this material over straight to Colonel Goodpaster.” And there was a direct, even flow of advice, information, requests that went straight to the White House without being interfered with by anybody. But it was a period clearly that Eisenhower and Dulles drew on the Foreign Service, and the Foreign Service really was at the heart of things then in a way that I think today people wouldn't realize.

Q: We'll make the next step. You went to NATO where you worked in what, the Office of the Secretary General? This was 1959 to '63.

VEST: No, to be, again, just to show that chance makes fools of us all. I was there. I'd been Burke's staff assistant. A preceding staff assistant had gone and been made the consul in Florence, and it was a wonderful reward. I spoke some Italian from having been in the war in Italy, and Burke and the others arranged that I would go and be the consul in Florence, with an apartment and a chauffeur and a chance to have a place down on

the Mediterranean in the summer and all those wonderful things, and that was what I was going to do next.

And one day—in that having all been agreed; my wife and I having looked at that as the next step—there wandered into my office a very nice guy named Ray Thurston. Ray Thurston was the political advisor to General Norstad, the Supreme Allied Commander at SHAPE headquarters. And Ray said to me, “I know that you're scheduled to go to Florence, but how would you like to come and be the junior boy who backstops me at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe with General Norstad? I'm the political advisor to General Norstad.” “Now,” he said, “you don't have anybody working for you, you're sometimes very much the bag boy who carries the messages around, but it's the heart of things that are really very interesting.” And he described SHAPE and NATO.

And, in one of those things that you do in life, I said, “Sounds great. I'd prefer that to going to Florence as the consul.” Came home and told my wife, who, bless her heart, has always backed me up, said, “Fine. If that's what you want to do.”

So I went, and for a year was the number two to the political advisor to General Norstad. Now in this period, General Norstad was an extremely important player in things European, as well as influential in the United States. Of course, he had worked for President Eisenhower when Eisenhower had headed SHAPE. He knew Dulles intimately. He knew MacMillan. He knew all the major European characters. The Supreme Allied Commander in those days was very much a grand satrap or a pendragon, or whatever you want to call it, a tremendous power, probably the last of the great, powerful supreme allied commanders. And it was just when de Gaulle had taken over the government and de Gaulle was gradually agitating to remove France from NATO, or from the NATO military structure, so the reporting and the activities were fantastic.

Mr. Thurston had a heart attack, and so for about four months, I was the acting political advisor because General Norstad wanted to hold it so that Thurston could come back. I

had unusual experiences that were just great, and I did that for a year. And then NATO Secretary General Stikker—Mr. Stikker had been the Dutch foreign minister and the Dutch perm rep to NATO—and he became the next Secretary General.

The chef de cabinet in NATO had always been a Frenchman. The French were slow under de Gaulle to appoint one. Mr. Stikker, being a Dutchman with all of a Dutchman's toughness and readiness to anger if need be, if he figures he's being pushed around, decided that he would take a chef de cabinet from somewhere else. I had, by that time, gone to work for our perm rep to NATO, Mr. Finletter at NATO.

Q: Thomas Finletter.

VEST: Thomas K. Finletter. I had met Mr. Stikker. I had carried messages to him, whatnot, and so he, in his way, made up his mind one day and simply called me down and told me, “I've chosen you to be my next chef de cabinet.” Now he was a close friend of Norstad's. I'm sure Norstad told him, “This is an American who will lack many of the things you're used to as a European, but he's worked for me for a year and I know he is a dedicated and loyal person and he'll do his damnedest.”

Because I was shocked beyond belief, I told Mr. Stikker, “Sir, you've made a dreadful mistake. I don't speak fluent enough French, I'm an American, and the Americans should have a low profile in the NATO house. I don't know the way Europeans do things. Really, you should get someone else.”

And Mr. Stikker looked at me and said, “Well, I've made my decision, so you just go and do the best you can.” He then told Ambassador Finletter—he hadn't even consulted him—and told Secretary of State Dean Rusk. I went to work, and then for three years plus I was seconded away from the U.S. Government on the staff of the NATO international secretariat as the chef de cabinet for Mr. Stikker.

Q: What was obviously remarkable training for dealing with European affairs.

VEST: Stu, it was absolutely fantastic. First of all, what was inherent in the job is I learned how a European group of diplomats, when they're in NATO, work together or don't work together and who were the good ones and who weren't. Second, I met all of the young diplomats that were to be the senior diplomats a little later on, because they would be part of the NATO structure or working in their permanent delegations. And every time Mr. Stikker visited a foreign country—every time—I accompanied him to every single visit he ever made in three and a half years, including to Presidents back here. And I sat in on every visit and every conversation he ever had, whether it was with a king or a prime minister or a defense minister or the President of the United States or anything else, because that's what he wanted me to do to make a record. He liked a very complete record, and these were his records. So I sat in on everything that was being done in NATO for three and a half years.

Q: Did you have any problem with dual allegiance?

VEST: Never. No. Mr. Rusk made it very clear that when I went off, I worked for the Secretary General of NATO, and that was it. Now I had access to American telegrams. I knew what was being done, and Mr. Rusk's instructions were very clear that I was to keep the Secretary General of NATO informed of what was being done so that he could do his job as a major figure responsible for a major policy area. The result was that throughout the time that I was there, I was allowed to go and read the American traffic that was coming in, and I was allowed to inform the Secretary General whatever I wished.

I would have to say, in all fairness to Ambassador Finletter and to his deputy, who I worked with a lot, Elbridge Durbrow, and Durby and Ambassador Finletter never tried to interfere. They were wonderful people. I mean, really wonderful people. I owe Durby a lot because, in the end, as you know, we have our efficiency reports. Mr. Stikker got this elongated form that he was to fill out the first year. I can still remember it. I had been working for him for about a year. He looked at all this and he said to himself, “This is nonsense,” and he wrote across one space, “I consider this officer is doing an excellent

job, quite comparable to that which I would expect from excellent officers in the Dutch Foreign Service." Signed, Dirk Stikker. That was it. He sent in the form. [Laughter]

It went to Durbrow. I scratched my head and thought, "Well, that's the way life is." Durby sat down and wrote an additional efficiency report, all on his own, because we had no guidance in those days. This was the first time there had ever been an American doing the job. And Durby sat down with great generosity and wrote—and then he showed me what he had done— an efficiency report which tried to give some flavor as to what I was doing and how I was doing it and what regard I had earned from the world for which I had to work, and sent it in. Now, that was a wonderful thing to do. I have so many senior officers to be grateful for, and that's one.

Q: George, what gave Stikker, and you as his hand holder, or whatever you want to call it, bag holder, the greatest problem during this period? Sounds like it must be France.

VEST: No, there were two problems, and Stikker would be the first to say when asked what are my problems. One was France and one was the United States. When he came in, de Gaulle was already there, so France became the increasing problem all the way through, more and more difficulties.

Q: When did France—to put this in perspective—actually leave the military

VEST: It did not do so until—if my memory serves me right—about the mid '60s. It had not left, but it had already forecast the direction it was going. It had taken out certain elements of the French fleet in the Mediterranean. In other words, it had begun the incremental process, and you could see it.

The United States was another thing. Stikker and Norstad began their involvement in the NATO world at a time when there was Eisenhower and Dulles, with whom they had the greatest intimacy and the greatest ease. And then came the Kennedy Administration, and there was a radical change in policy, as well as personalities. The Eisenhower-

Dulles Administration had introduced the NATO atomic stockpile. They had had a summit meeting of NATO leaders, which they promised all kinds of missiles and other kinds of nuclear armament to the alliance. In came the Kennedy Administration, and Kennedy and McNamara said, “We've gone too far in nuclear missiles. We are going to have to look to see how we pull back from this enthusiastic, rather unthought through, dependance on nuclear missiles.”

This meant that—to put it bluntly—things that had been promised at the heads of government NATO summit were not going to be delivered. Stikker and Norstad continued to fight for the fulfillment of those earlier policies an promises They argued and there was a large debate that went on and discussions that constantly went on, but in the end, Norstad was asked to retire because of it and Stikker was fundamentally, rather heavily, frustrated because of it.

But I never had a problem of divided loyalties because the U.S. never asked me or tried to limit how I did my job.

Q: You saw at that time Stikker and Norstad wanting to have an increased nuclear armament there.

VEST: For NATO, and shared by the NATO countries. Remember this was the period, for lack of anything else, the U.S. came up with the ill-fated MLF, multilateral force idea, in which there would be nuclear weapons on a mixed-manned, multinational manned, ship.

Q: Everybody with different keys.

VEST: Everyone with different functions. We never got to the point of defining entirely who else might ever have a key.

Q: Well, when you're coming up with this MLF, what was Stikker's reaction, and those around him, to that type of thing?

VEST: Stikker never had any doubt about one thing, which is that NATO, in the last analysis, to mean anything had to have American involvement. He was a very deeply pro-American man. Even when he was the most frustrated with McNamara and so on, there was never, never any question about— as matter of fact, like a lot of the Dutch, he saw the United States as the hope for the west. I think he felt the MLF was a dubious idea, but if the Americans wanted to propel it, he would see how far it would go.

There were other ideas that were floated at that time of one kind or another. Basically, he always wanted to try to be helpful to the United States, frankly. He was very pro-American, like so many men of his generation and his experience. He had relatives who lived in the States. He had children who had studied in the States. He preferred to speak English to any other language. He had been the ambassador in Great Britain, but he really spoke a sort of unaccented English.

It was a period when, however, he had his difficulties. Ambassador Finletter and he were personally very, very antithetical. I mean, Finletter was determined to run everything, and in his way, Mr. Stikker felt he should run things. Finletter was always out to knife Norstad, and for Stikker, Norstad was both a friend and, for him, the Supreme Allied Commander was somebody that everybody ought to try to trust and build up and not knife and in petty, mean way, which frankly was what Finletter did in his comments at all times.

So it was an unhappy relationship, and there was a further unhappiness that we were trying back here, as I saw it at least, to try to find alternatives to a heavy reliance on nuclear weapons, and we were not that sure how we wanted to move ourselves. When he would talk to McNamara, McNamara would almost as much as say that. This left Stikker at very much a disadvantage.

Q: What was the part that Germany played? Was there unease by Stikker and others about the role of Germany?

VEST: Very interesting, Stu, that you should mention this because two things in my memory stand out. One is what I'd call the recollection of residual hostility that came out of the war. If there was one thing that you could pick up from all of the people around there, it was still that residual reserve. When I went to SHAPE in—whatever it was—'58, '59, the Germans had only been part at SHAPE headquarters for about I think eight or ten months, and there were people in— certainly the Danish and Norwegian delegations—military delegations—at SHAPE headquarters who simply refused to speak to any of the Germans who had come there. I mean, they just put them in Coventry. They didn't speak to them, that's all. Which shows you how these things can be.

That second summer when we came back on home leave, we turned over our house to a very nice, young German officer who had several children and lived in an apartment. And he and his wife and children came and occupied our house while we were on vacation and they paid the rent, but they had a place to come. And when we came back, I still remember, both husband and wife burst into tears, this German officer and his wife, saying they had had such a lovely time and that we were the first people who had been kind to them in the whole time so far since they'd been there. That was how close the background was.

When you talk to the politicians when I got down to NATO headquarters, when you talked about when there was to be a meeting in one of the capitals, the whole attitude was, “Well, whatever else we do, let's not meet in Bonn. We can meet in Paris or in London on in Rome. There's no reason to have to go to Bonn.” That's when it would come out. So there was strong residual hostility that was still going on there into, I'd say, the early '60s.

But now to get to the next phase you mentioned—worry about them. Because you had as a defense minister, Mr. Franz Joseph Strauss, pretty cocky, boisterous, bull dog in a china shop, type of person. And typical of it I remember when...

Q: Why don't we stop right here for one second.

[End Tape 1, Side 2] [Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Q: George, you were talking about the view of the new Minister of Defense of Germany, Franz Joseph Strauss.

VEST: Typical of the problem and of the reserves. In the early years, for example, after the heads of government meeting, the Americans—President Eisenhower—had agreed to make available IRBMs, intercontinental range ballistic missiles, for the alliance, to be stationed in some alliance countries. General Norstad was to be responsible for the program at SHAPE, and he was to find out which countries they would position these new missiles in.

I still remember the day General Norstad called me in. With sort of a wry smile, he said, “I've been sounding out countries as to which ones would like to have IRBMs. I've just had a visit from Franz Joseph Strauss, and he has said, 'Germany would be delighted to be the first country to have the IRBMs.'” [Laughter] And he said, “I counseled him that I really thought it would be a bad idea for Germany to be the first country to have IRBMs,” thereby showing both how maladroit and rambunctious Strauss could be, but how sensitive Norstad was. Ultimately later, you may or may not remember, we did station them in Italy and in Turkey. None were ever positioned in Germany.

There was in this period considerable reserve and suspicion, verging in some corners to worry about what the Germans might grow to be. They were becoming clearly the major land army in central Europe for the alliance. They, I think, conducted themselves with absolute probity and correctness and discretion. They did not push in NATO or in SHAPE, but there was real sensitivity there.

Q: Looking at the other side of the equation, I have been asked by a diplomatic historian saying all this challenge assumptions in these things. Could you look at what our assumption was of the threat, i.e., the other side of the mountain, the Soviet Union?

VEST: At this time, you're talking about the end of '50, early into the '60s.

Q: Into the '60s, yes.

VEST: You never heard anybody in those days, whether they were in NATO headquarters, American official visitors on briefings, the SHAPE headquarters itself, you never heard anybody that didn't give the picture that there was a very serious threat, and that the massive ground forces, tanks, all that kind of thing were of such that you had to do your damnedest to be able to deal with the unexpected. They took it very seriously. I mean, there was no question about this general sense of concern in that period.

Q: You assumed that the Soviet Union had hostile intents?

VEST: You assumed that the Soviet Union continued to be governed by the way in which it had been before in early times in this historical period. That if they found enough weakness, they would probe and try to take it, as they did at Kars and Ardahan, as they did in Tabriz.

Q: Is there an Iran during that?

VEST: Yes. Wherever they felt there was weakness, people believed they would try to probe it and take advantage of it, and so they would have this common defense to make sure that the Soviets had no illusions that there was weakness.

Q: Where did you consider there might be a particular weakness within the NATO, within NATO countries rather than the structure? What concerned you the most? I mean, the people you were working with.

VEST: I don't have a memory of anyone being weak. There was a special thing that they knew they had to deal with, and that was that the two Scandinavian members, Norway and Denmark, would not allow nuclear weapons to be sited on their soil; therefore, the northern

flank was always going to have to be treated specially. There was a feeling that Denmark particularly was susceptible to neutralism. Not Norway particularly, but Denmark.

The other area weakness was the other flank in Greece- Turkey, where the weakness was not so much a matter that either one of them might flirt with the Soviets, but that they just might get themselves all tangled up irretrievably with each other—as they did repeatedly—giving an opening to be played on by the Soviets.

Q: Why this insistence and concern about stationing nuclear arms on a place? I mean, after all, a fairly hefty load of nuclear weapons can be flown in within a matter of hours practically, or delivered anywhere even at that time.

VEST: That fact is true, but the political facts are as following. One, if everybody had nuclear weapons on their soil, then no country is singled out as a target. That's the first. Second, if you have had a long period in which you said, “We will not have nuclear weapons on our soil,” how rapidly could that country take a political decision to allow them to come in? Taking hard political decisions rapidly is not characteristic of democracies.

Q: So the idea was a banding together?

VEST: Do it together. Everybody be the same kind of target, everybody be ready to do their job together. Now, we did build areas to make it possible to have instantaneous delivery of nuclear missiles to the Scandinavian areas so that they could do it rapidly, but this “no nuclear weapons” had very deep policy meaning for the Scandinavians because I believe they honestly feared, after all that had gone on, that if they took too provocative an action there, this would influence the Russians to be that much tougher with the Finns. The Finns were sort of in the in-between, and there was always a sense of delicacy among the Scandinavians that “We've got to make sure we don't load the plate too heavily and invite real pressure, and perhaps retaliation, on the Finns.”

Q: Speaking of missiles, were you with NATO at the time of the missile crisis in October of '63 or '62?

VEST: Cuba. Where was—you know, I have no idea where I was at the time. I was there, but I was not present when any of the activity took place. I may have been back here. My mother-in-law was ill, and I may have been back here at that time. I know I missed it, and I was told afterwards about Acheson's visit and Acheson's briefing and Acheson's call on de Gaulle and all these things, but I was not around at the time.

Q: When did you leave this Office of the Secretary General?

VEST: It must have been—I'm very, Stu, terrible about dates—probably mid '63, and then I went for a year to the National War College.

Q: National War College. And then your next assignment was to, what, DCM?

VEST: No. Then I was again, without any action on my part—you know, you get taped—I was then pulled off and was sent to the Bureau of European Affairs RPM, the office that works on regional, political, and military activities, inherently NATO, and I worked in that office for, oh, it must have been three years, as far as I can recall. David Popper was the director at that time.

Q: What were our principal concerns during this period? Do you feel Vietnam was a terrible drag on what we were...

VEST: It shows you how provincial things can be. In NATO, in my memory I have two big episodes. One is de Gaulle withdrawing the forces—or asking that our forces withdraw from France, and the second was trying to figure out what in the world to do about Mintoff and Malta and getting out of the NATO base which was there in Malta.

On the first one, I was a party as a junior—more junior participant—to the byplay that went on in Washington once word came that de Gaulle was insisting that we would have to get out of France in the NATO military. Dean Acheson was brought back as special advisor, and in the office up above the sixth floor, they had—I can still to this day remember—a vivid meeting in which, as I recall it, we had the Secretaries of State and Defense, and David Bruce had come back from London, and McGeorge Bundy was there as the NSC advisor to the President, and all the other senior people, and I was the junior person there. Dean Acheson was there and they were arguing, and they were insisting, as a result of this action on de Gaulle's part, that we would look around and figure every single way to throw the book back at France, put our relations to the minimum, retaliate in every punitive way we could. In other words, the hardest possible reaction policy.

I've never forgotten McGeorge Bundy, because the fever heat was fairly high, McGeorge Bundy said, “Well, all of this is very interesting, because what you're saying is you wish to kick France formally out of NATO.”

And they agreed, “Yes, that's just what they wanted.”

He said, “Well, it's very interesting, but I think that the President of the United States will want to think very carefully before we go so far as to take the act to throw France out of the North Atlantic Council.” And that ended the meeting, and, of course, we never did that. I was very impressed with McGeorge Bundy, who obviously went back to the President and they thought some more, and they adopted a much more graduated policy of coldness and reserve and of non-cooperation in certain areas, but we never took that other step.

I have never forgotten Dean Acheson called me up, with one other officer whose name I forget now who worked in the German division, and asked about the attitude of the other countries if we should attempt to throw France out. Having worked there— and not only throwing them out, but blackball France in every way—and I told Mr. Acheson that I did not believe that the majority of the European countries would do this to France,

that they would simply hold their nose and go on their way. He was used to a kind of European management that he could have done right after World War II, but by mid 1960s, Europeans were not the same group of people. I know when he left he turned to Larry Eagleburger, who was his staffer, saying, “I'm tired of those pantywaists downstairs.” So that is what we did. We were cold, but we never did adopt a virulent response, which would not have changed de Gaulle at all.

Q: It would have just made things worse.

VEST: Which would have embarrassed the Europeans dreadfully, because they had to live with France there next door to them, and so I think that, frankly, the American policy was exactly right, and it's given time for the gradual shift of the world as we see it today.

Q: As you look, and I'm talking now about July of 1989, we seem to be almost going through the same thing regarding China. It's a completely different situation, but the idea is the Chinese have done some considerable repression after we'd gone through a glowing period and we want to punish. I'm not surprised, but maybe it shows a real problem in our foreign policy process, of wanting to punish, and these are, I think, distinguished people.

VEST: I think it shows a fundamental problem we have in our own national ethos, because we can get very concerned about things that strike us as morally wrong. We can get upset about this kind of thing, and we feel something should be done about it. Well, frequently there is much less you can do about it than you'd like, and you have to hold your nose and wait.

Q: And things change.

VEST: And things do change.

Q: I have to keep laying this on a chronological basis. Now, let's see, you were dealing with the political military side, and then after that, you went as deputy chief of mission to

the European Community? How about the Mintoff thing? Maybe we might talk a little about Mintoff.

VEST: In the Mintoff thing we just talked a little bit because, in true terms, it's a peanut. But in time and effort and money consumed, it was anything but a peanut. In George Ball you had someone who felt that what we should do is ask Malta to become a NATO member. There were others who said, “If there's one thing we don't want to do it's take on a Malta,” and this was argued very largely. And then when it came time to leave, Mintoff, who was impossibly wily and really a hopeless individual in many ways to deal with. The only way to deal with him was simply to say, “What you're saying doesn't matter as far as we're concerned.” But very few people had the guts to say that when they thought he might turn Malta over to the Russians.

We had to pay our way out of it, and we had a long argument. That's where I first worked with Peter Carrington, who was then the Minister of Defense for Great Britain, and it was the British NATO headquarters in Malta and they were responsible primarily. The Italians wanted to be sweet and pay. The British wanted to pay as little as possible. And the Americans, worried from the Pentagon about what might happen to the Soviets or somebody moving into Malta, were more inclined to pay then not. It was a long, arduous negotiation, because every time people thought we had a price, Mintoff's view was, “Well, if they can pay that much, they can pay more.” And so eventually we paid and eventually we left, and it never became a member of NATO, which would have been a stupid thing to have done, and it has fallen back into a more natural relationship with the rest of Europe. But it took an awful lot of time. [Laughter] Particularly when George Ball is enthusiastic about something, you have an awful lot of visits to the seventh floor, is all I can say.

Q: I will say the seventh floor, for those reading, this is where the Secretary of State and his principal subordinates dwell.

VEST: That's right. I was up there so often. [Laughter]

Q: Would this cover the time when you went from this job as deputy chief of mission to the European Community? Or was there something in between?

VEST: I did this in the NATO office and then worked for Ambassador [John Robert] Schaetzel who was our ambassador to the European Community, who had been the deputy assistant secretary in the EUR.

Q: That's Robert Schaetzel.

VEST: Robert Schaetzel. And when it came time to get a new deputy, he sent word he'd like me to come and be his deputy chief of mission. This again is one of the sort of happenstances of life. I had not worked—I was familiar with him in the casual sense, because we all worked there together in the Bureau of European Affairs—but I had not worked in any intimate way at all with affairs involving European Community. I had worked in NATO affairs. So I was very reluctant to take the job, but he insisted and reiterated his offer, and so I went to be the DCM to our mission to the European Community.

Q: This was '67 to '69.

VEST: '67 to '69. And I'd have to say it was a wonderful experience. It was more, again, a learning experience for me. I was learning to be a DCM. I quickly learned how to deal with making unpleasant decisions known to people, which any DCM has to do. I had great backing and understanding from Bob Schaetzel, who, in turn, was really educating me on the intricacies of the European commission with which I was not particularly familiar. I knew them casually only from previous activities.

Fortunately, a number of the people who were in the European commission, or the permanent representatives to the European commission, were also people who I'd known in NATO. I began to, what I'd call, reap the harvest of my earlier experiences, because in the French, German, and Italian, were all people I had known as junior officers, met in my earlier experiences in the European scene, so it paid off. They were people I could talk

very, very freely to, and I would say it was the most open, easy, transparent relationship. You didn't have a problem. You could pick up a phone and say, “I hear that you all are thinking about a new rule on the control on the import of soybeans. What is it you are thinking about?” and they would tell you. I mean, it wasn't difficult, I'd have to say. They were very open.

Q: What were our interests in NATO in the European Community? We're talking about the late '60s, before it had really coalesced to be what it is today.

VEST: One kind of interest was, I would say, we were still carrying and arguing very much the political value of a more united Europe, so we saw in the European Community and the European commission and all of that activity a political objective that we strongly supported and for which we were still prepared to defer a certain amount when it came to economic or agricultural disadvantage. We would suffer a little bit for that political policy that we were advocating because, among other things, it's one more of those areas where Germany is brought into a European group.

Q: Much of it was grouped around what do you do about Germany and let's get them integrated with everybody else.

VEST: It was inherently France-Germany. France and Germany—I would have to give joint genius to de Gaulle and Adenauer. They set up a heartland, which were the two worst enemies, and said, “We are going to be the two best friends, and we will build an European Community around it.” And that is inherently what they set out to do, and, of course, de Gaulle excluded Britain and said, “We're going to do it this continental way.”

But it was France-Germany. We thought it was immeasurably valuable, and we were prepared to endure quite a lot. We were seen as having been proponents from the beginning, because we had been all the way through. Now in the time that I was there, we began to see the beginnings, I think, of a change. We began to have very serious problems, primarily in the agricultural area. The Europeans joined together in something

called the Common Agricultural Policy. This was very expensive for our agriculture. It tended to limit our grain market.

Q: And this was actually our biggest export.

VEST: And this was our biggest export. And, therefore, we began to hit that cutting edge where the political policy is costing too much economically, and in that couple years that I was there I could see the real evolution of that change.

Q: Let me ask you a question. As a Foreign Service officer dealing at this level, I sort of have the gut instinct of this that when there's a push and shove between economics and political, we tend to zero in and say whatever furthers our political goals, and leave the economics to one side. Did you have this feeling? Or were we getting pretty tough on economics?

VEST: I think it would be very interesting, because I think in the period I'm talking about, you could begin to see exactly that shift. That before I went there, and when I first went there, if there was push to shove between political goal and economic disadvantage, we would end up supporting the political goal. By the time that I left, which was two plus years later, I think the agricultural issues had become large enough you could see that we would not pay any economic price to support that political goal. I mean, after all, you're talking about millions, millions of dollars. Just lots and lots of money is involved, and it affects a huge segment of our voting population, who in turn affect our Congress, who in turn affect our policy. So I could see the change happening at that time.

Q: Well, did you find that the other members of the European Community were playing on you to say, “Well, go along with this because this will make us stronger politically and more of a bulwark against communism, and just forget about the grain”?

VEST: No. At that time there seemed to be a fair degree of differentiation between NATO activities and Community activities and one that has continued almost right on up to the

present. What they were saying, “what we're doing in the economic field is only temporary. It's an effort to try to rebuild destroyed areas of life, to rebuild healthy nations. And it's inconvenient to you now, but hang on, it won't last,” was the position they were taking. And to be fair, I think they meant it. I think they thought that the structure they were building, called the Common Agricultural Policy, which exists to this day to our disadvantage, was something that would balance out. Well, they never found a way to balance it out. But I think they meant it when they said, “These are not serious; you're overreacting.”

Q: You seemed to switch hats, but sort of in the same area.

VEST: I did. I got a telephone call one day from Alex Johnson, and Alex said, “George, the White House has just telephoned, and you're going to go over right away by this Friday and be the DCM at NATO.”And I said, “How did that happen?”

And they said, “Well, the ambassador to NATO, Bob Ellsworth, has very close connections with the White House, and he's looking for a new DCM, and he's chosen you.” So it was just like that.

Q: This is 1969.

VEST: Yes. I went over to NATO and became the DCM over there. And that was a very interesting period in itself.

Q: First, before we get into that, Ellsworth was a political appointee, wasn't he?

VEST: Ellsworth was a political appointee. He had been one of the campaign managers for Nixon and Schaetzel was still there, being left there even though by background, he was an acknowledged liberal Democrat.

Q: Within the NATO structure, which I would assume would be a fairly complicated business. I mean, it's not just one organization and what we're trying to do. It's a fairly difficult place, and there seems to be a tendency to drop political appointees in there, often

because one thinks where it's located. Where was it located? Was it in Brussels at that time?

VEST: It was in Brussels by then.

Q: But it seems to be one of the political plums, almost used on a par with appointing somebody to Luxembourg.

VEST: Not quite. In fact, not at all that. It was considered a very important place. This is not always, but most of the time. And among those so important that it was considered the place you would send a political appointee of the highest quality who had easy and immediate access to the President, no matter what happened. Now, if you went back through the list of political appointees who had been there, most of them fell in that area; and just as Ellsworth had been a counselor in the White House after the Nixon election, he came to that. Later, Don Rumsfeld came to that. Close, very close, to the President and to the top leaders of the party.

Q: So this in case, the story that a political appointee is close to the President, which usually isn't the case. It's just somebody who gave money.

VEST: In this case it was meant to be.

Q: In this case, it had that. Did you find this worked as opposed, to say, having somebody who dealt in NATO affairs for a long time or a professional Foreign Service officer?

VEST: Yes, it can work. I mean, my experience with political ambassadors, I'd have to say you just cannot totally generalize. My political ambassador in Canada—the first one when I went there—is owed more than most people realize. He was Stanley Woodward, who had been chief of protocol and knew Truman very well. Well, in the last days of the Truman Administration—this is a divagation, but worth recording of what you can have happen. In

the very end of the Truman Administration, Truman was still the President. I think it was December, the month of December.

Q: This would be 1952?

VEST: Yes. Truman had lost the election. Eisenhower had not yet been sworn in, and in that week, the Canadians, deciding they could never get the Americans to make up their minds and do anything — the subject which they talked about for 50 years—met, and the Canadian Cabinet decided, “We will go ahead with an all-Canadian St. Lawrence Seaway.” And one of the ministers—I think it was C.D. Howe; it may have been Mike Pearson—called Ambassador Woodward and said, “I feel you should know we've met in the Cabinet. We are now prepared to go ahead with an all-Canadian seaway, and we're letting you know. We realize the in-between period you're in, but this is now what's going to happen.”

Stanley Woodward got on the telephone and called President Truman that night, got him in the evening, and reported all of this to President Truman and said, “This is of too much importance to the United States to let this happen this way. I urge you to get on the telephone and talk to President-elect Eisenhower. I realize how difficult this is, and see if you cannot get a commitment from President-elect Eisenhower that he personally will try to get legislation out of the Congress to allow for a joint U.S.-Canadian seaway.” Truman did that. Eisenhower did—and, I mean, they weren't fun together.

Q: No, no.

VEST: But Truman did it, and Eisenhower said, “I will. This is too important.” Truman then called Woodward. Woodward then called the Canadians and said, “The President- elect has given his commitment. Will you hold up until at least you see what comes of that?” And they did. And so today we have a joint U.S.-Canadian seaway. Now that could only

have been done by someone who had the personal intimacy that Ambassador Woodward had with Truman. I mean, that is a sample of it.

In NATO, any number of times the NATO ambassador has telephoned the White House for one reason or another. And, I mean, never anything so totally dramatic as that, but there's been a tradition which left that always as a possibility. Only once—or twice, rather, it seems to me—have they had ambassadors who did not really have that kind of distinction.

While I was there as a DCM, Ellsworth left, and then for nine months I was a charg#. And they sent as ambassador David Kennedy, who had been the Secretary of the Treasury. Mr. Kennedy was a nice man, but he was not interested at all in the NATO business. He was more interested in international trade, textile, shoes, things of this nature.

Q: He would be much better at the European Community.

VEST: Somewhere else. Anyway, he was not interested. He did not have access. It was clearly a matter of a polite shunting aside. I think the present, or the most recent, ambassador there is much the same thing. He was a number two or three in the NSC, and when they cleaned out the NSC there, they sent him off over there. But aside from these two episodes, it's been that way. We had one career officer, Tapley Bennett. He was from Georgia. I think that he had enough of a Georgia rapport with the Georgians in the Carter Administration to make it natural. Certainly, David Abshire, as a political appointee, quite literally, when there was a big revive push to pull the troops down or out of Europe, he got on the phone, not only to the White House, but to Sam Nunn.

Q: Sam Nunn being the senator from Georgia.

VEST: The senator from Georgia, who had the most influence on what we might do in the NATO military field. And I know David Abshire directly dealt with the White House, the State Department, and the Senate to counter what would have been a premature activity.

So it is a political appointee, but normally it has been one of real distinction who could do something.

Q: Did you have any memorable problems or situations while you were in NATO, or was it running along a fairly smooth course at that point? We're talking about '69 to '70.

VEST: Mine weren't times of great change, but I didn't have much real difficulty. In the period that I was there you got the beginnings of the new policies that came with Nixon and Kissinger in the White House and then Kissinger later as Secretary of State, which is the exploration of MBFR, the exploration of the CSCE, the European Security Conference idea, the negotiation of arrangements governing Berlin. All of these things were underway. They all had to be discussed in NATO. You had the SALT treaty getting underway.

I'd have to say, generally, I had pretty good cooperation, particularly in the nine months when I was the charg#. Andy Goodpaster by that time was the Supreme Allied Commander. Mel Laird was Secretary of Defense, and I had gotten to know him earlier. Mr. Rogers was Secretary of State, and he was not particularly involved in anything, but he would back you up if need be. Walt Stoessel took over eventually as the assistant secretary for European affairs. We had big arguments as to whether we would go ahead with MBFR and CSCE.

Q: Which is?

VEST: Mutual Balanced Force Reductions for conventional armaments. And the CSCE, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was to be a negotiation on non- military areas that could be used to reduce tension and enhance cooperation among the countries. What was very interesting is the policy from the State Department clearly favored both of them, doing them both. I had very much the feeling—and I'd have to say I had no instructions ever to back this up—but I had very much the feeling that Mr. Kissinger's crowd in the White House, where he was then in the NSC, would like to

have gone ahead with MBFR and would like to have avoided having to go ahead with the CSCE.

Now the NATO countries, the Scandinavians and so on, were particularly insistent where if you did one, you had to do the other. My guidance out of the State Department left me free to support both of them, so I did, in spite of conversations of people who wandered into town who said, “Well, it would be nice if we didn't have to go ahead with CSCE.” But I didn't have a problem.

Q: You didn't feel any division in our foreign police apparatus between Kissinger in the NSC and Rogers of the State Department?

VEST: Oh yes, yes.

Q: How did this play out in the field?

VEST: Rogers and company were saying, “Let's do both.” Kissinger and company were clearly sending signals, “Let's try to not have the CSCE.” There was that right there.

Q: From whence came your real orders?

VEST: Oh, my orders were very simple. I picked them from the State Department, because they were the ones I liked. [Laughter] It was very simple.

Q: Did you have the feeling that other missions around, where there may have been some division between the two, that there was a certain amount of playing off one?

VEST: No, I couldn't have told you, and I really didn't know. This nine months was just exactly the time when it was all being discussed, and it was a hectic one. And since I was the charg# from month to month to month, I was pretty busily keeping my nose to my own grindstone.

Q: Well, George, could we go on? You then became the director of the Bureau of Military Affairs in 1974.

VEST: No. You've skipped something.

Q: Well, I have some skips here, and I can't...this is for the record.

VEST: What happened after that, you know, I'd been the charg#. Then along came Ambassador Kennedy. I was there, and I had been over four years in Brussels. First at the European Community mission and then at NATO mission. With one of those ironies of life, Mr. Rogers was there for a foreign minister's meeting, and he assured me—

Q: He was at that time Secretary of State.

VEST: He assured me I'd be staying on for another year, and about two months later, I got the word that I was being sent to be in charge of our preliminary negotiations on the CSCE. So I then, at my personal expense, left Emily and the three children in Brussels because the schooling was there. It was one of the few times in life when I think anybody's ever moved from riches to rags, because I moved from a DCM residence with servants and everything furnished to a small duplex with stuff that we got out of the embassy storage houses, and it was the other half of a Tunisian nightclub.

Q: In Brussels?

VEST: In Brussels. But it meant they could stay there and continue with their schooling, and I went to Helsinki in the fall and headed the U.S. delegation that negotiated the preparatory talks for the CSCE.

Now we never knew how many months it would be and had no idea when it would end. It was the most fun I've ever had. It was a negotiation where I had very few instructions. I think Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Rogers were more or less canceling each other out back

in Washington as far as I could tell. And we negotiated the whole thing, which set the framework for the subsequent European security conference procedure and the areas we would pursue and all the rest. I had good backing from the State Department, very good backing in every way that I wanted. I had one horrendous episode.

Q: Let me just stop right here for a second.

Q: You're saying you had one horrendous episode.

VEST: I had one horrendous episode. We had reached that stage where the Russians, of course, were pushing us to do as little as possible and to certainly not get involved in human rights, and the Europeans, our NATO allies and the Scandinavians and the neutrals, were anxious to broaden the scope of the activity and to involve some responsibility for human rights in this whole activity. At about that time—and I was speaking in favor of human rights and going on and having a solid base.

Q: This is under the Nixon Administration?

VEST: Under the Nixon Administration, with guidance from Secretary of State Rogers. At about that time, there was some NATO meetings in the U.S., and all of the NATO ambassadors from Washington were invited out to San Clemente.

Q: San Clemente being the summer home in California of President Nixon.

VEST: And while they were there, Henry Kissinger, the head of the NSC, gave them a briefing, and the briefing was of sufficient startling quality that it obviously led each of these separate ambassadors to then send telegrams off to their Helsinki representative and to their capitals. And I was then called in by my various negotiating friends. Again, many of them people I'd known from my earlier days in NATO. We were a very frank group. The Luxembourg, the Belgian, the Dutch, the Canadian, the British, the Norwegian—and I can't think who else, but I can remember all of them—one by one all called me in and

asked me to read their telegram, which is a very unusual procedure. And the essence of each of these telegrams was very clear. That Mr. Kissinger had said to them, “I think you're being very wrong in all this effort you're making about human rights in the European security conference activity at Helsinki. What's important is MBFR, and you shouldn't be bothering with any of this. You shouldn't make it that difficult for the Soviets. You should forget all this business about human rights. This is not the right place to do this. Forget it. It's not really very important.” Anyway, CSCE isn't important, MBFR is. Don't exacerbate the Russians. Give in.”

Well, each of these people let me read their telegram and said, “What is the policy?” Well, I was flabbergasted, of course, and angry, and, of course, to each of them I said, “The policy is the policy of the United States Government as reflected in my instructions, and we are supporting a strong human rights activity in the CSCE.”

I then wrote a letter. First I got out and hiked across the ice near the hotel for about a half an hour across and half an hour back in the dead of winter, and I then came back and wrote one of those intemperate letters to the assistant secretary for European affairs, Walt Stoessel, saying, “This was happened. It's impossible. How can you expect me to carry on a negotiation when something like this has been done, and what am I to do about this, so on and so on.”

Q: I might, just for somebody reading, you were careful enough. It may have been intemperate, but you wrote a letter.

VEST: That's right.

Q: Because the worst thing in the world is to write...

VEST: For that one I wrote a letter. [Laughter]

Q: Could you explain why for somebody doing this?

VEST: Because I knew there would be many copies all over, and I did not know what was happening in Washington. I didn't know whether maybe things were in process of change and that Mr. Rogers was going to give up. I wanted to know where we were going, but I didn't feel I could do anything unless I knew.

Q: I want to stress this point, George, because these interviews are aimed at people who are researching, and there's an addiction to reading the cable traffic.

VEST: Okay. I see your point.

Q: There are times when cables aren't appropriate, because one, you might be sending something in which could bring lightning on your head. But you want to find out, but you don't say, "What is this? I'm getting this in official traffic."

VEST: In this case, it might have gotten spread around and then created a rumpus of another nature and of another level between Kissinger and Rogers with unintended consequences. It might go either way.

And so I wanted to find out. I got a wonderful letter back from Walt Stoessel which said more or less as follows: "Dear George. I do know how you feel. This happens to me quite often. [Laughter] Now what can you do about it? I really don't know what you can do about it except go by your instructions. At least you know they are instructions which have the clearance and the authority of the Secretary of State, who is still the Secretary of State."

Q: So Kissinger really was a loose cannon?

VEST: He was a very loose cannon.

The result was that I did go ahead with it. And periodically I would get telephone calls from Washington saying, "You're being very strong on human rights." And I would say, "But I feel I'm entitled to." There would be nervous members— and this is interesting—

nervous members of the State Department who knew about these fights that were going on between Rogers and Kissinger and felt maybe we should trim a little bit. Well, we didn't trim.

Q: I might add that my impression is that, out of this whole Helsinki thing, it's human rights that has been the point. In fact, I can't think of anything else. I'm sure there were.

VEST: There were, but they would be minor if not for the human rights. That's what it's about.

Q: And it was done under the Nixon Administration.

VEST: It was done under the Nixon Administration, with the instructions of Rogers, under the constant effort of Kissinger to undercut it. [Laughter] I have another wonderful episode that I can't resist telling.

Q: Please.

VEST: And that is I went back to Washington at a certain point—I did periodically—and I went over to the NSC staff and I called on one of they key staffers there who was following all of this with Kissinger. And I said, “Am I doing this job satisfactorily from your point of view?”

“Well, sure,” he said.

I said, “Well, of course, there's a balance here of how far we push the Russians and when we stop. Is that balance all right that I've achieved so far?”

He said, “Sure. Just fine. Why do you keep asking?”

I said, “Well, because the East Germans tell the West Germans that the Russians told them that Henry Kissinger said we were being too tough and that he would try and get us to calm down, and so I just want to know what the truth is.” [Laughter]

This guy laughed and he said, “Well, Henry Kissinger has a lot of conversations with Dobrynin. I mean, maybe that's been interpreted that way by the Soviets.” [Laughter] It was great fun.

Q: Well, tell me. One hears a great deal about the Soviets as negotiators. How did you find what you might call negotiating style, our negotiating being your negotiating style, and the Soviet ones? How did this play out?

VEST: I'd have to start with one thing, Stu, because it was a fascinating experience for me. Of course, a totally new experience. The Soviet negotiator—they had three ambassadors there, but one really did it all—was a chap named Mendelevich. Now Lev Mendelevich had long experience at Geneva and with the United Nations. He was one of their most experienced persons in dealing with the outside world. He spoke quite good English, better than Dobrynin, and was an extremely clever and experienced diplomat. I did the whole negotiation with him all the way through. I had certain assets. He had a great sense of humor, and I have a number of wonderful episodes to remember that because he did have humor. He was a loyal, convinced, absolutely dedicated I am sure, Soviet representative.

A couple of things. I learned gradually when he was speaking from Moscow and when he was really negotiating with us. I learned that we had to put up with some awful repetitive bluster in this multi-national 33-man table. I learned how to deal with it and he knew he was communicating without ever giving some things away. He had the kind of humor, I can still remember. One great bluster, he put on a big table-pounding speech. He didn't take off his shoe, but it was just about the only thing. And then he was followed by the Pole and then the East German and then by the Romanian and then by the Bulgarian and then by the Czech, and they each did just about the same thing. And I couldn't resist it. I

asked for the floor, and I said, “Mr. Chairman. I have just a very brief remark to say. Up here in this long winter in Helsinki, I have been rereading some of the Latin poets that I studied in school, and I discover in the Latin poet Juvenal the following statement, which seems to be so pertinent: 'To hear the same thing said over and over calls for bowels of iron.'” [Laughter] I said, “We all now have bowels of iron.” Well, Mendelevich himself roared with laughter, and they had been all so serious all the way through.

Q: I'd have to say for the record, you're pounding your fist down.

VEST: But we reached the stage finally, for example, in the end we came to the point where we couldn't decide when they'd finally give in and just agree that this was going to be the end of this preliminary phase. And we finally reached a stage of understanding where he said to me, “You have been watching. I know you're aware of how many times I have to make a record. Now, I'm going to be very precise. I'm going to have to be very angry for two weeks, and I'm going to have to make a lot of speeches and threats for two weeks. I'm convinced that you and your friends are not going to change. But at the end of two weeks, if that is the case, I will go back to Moscow to have further discussions, and I believe that Moscow will recognize what the situation is, but I'm telling you now.” Well, he did. He pounded the table and was saying he was angry and outrageous for two weeks, threatening and all kinds of things. Left, came back, and agreed to wind up the preparatory conference.

So you could communicate. He could be a mean, tough fighter. Threaten, bully, anything, and yet he could sort of chuckle at the end and say, “Well, I didn't win on that one.” He's probably not typical. He's not the Gromyko style. He's another style.

Q: One of the things I've heard repeated over the years is that Foreign Service officers are not really trained in negotiation and we're used to too much conciliation and all this. You said this is the first real negotiation you had. Did you feel like a virgin at an orgy?

VEST: Stu, really not at all, because you realize things when you look back. I hadn't been in charge, but I had done an awful lot of negotiation of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and that meant often I was doing some of it by myself.

Q: And with the Canadians, who we said are rough negotiators.

VEST: Who are friends, but tough. Dealing with the NATO Council for nine months as the charg# meant that I was negotiating with people all the time, I realized. Actually, after the first, say, month, I didn't feel particularly ill at ease in the negotiation. In fact, I felt comfortable enough at the negotiation that I started a process by which every couple of months I tried to change who my experts were so that I would develop a group of people in Embassy Moscow and back in Washington and in the Pentagon who were familiar with all that was going on.

Q: So they would be back in the seats of places where it would be important

VEST: For example, I had, among the people who advised me from the Soviet world, I had Mark Garrison out of Embassy Moscow, who was later the DCM and charg# there, I had Stape Roy, I had Curt Kamman, all of these people distinguished in our Soviet world. Each one as a younger officer came through and spent a time with me. I felt comfortable enough that I didn't mind having new people coming in. I'd have to admit. I had more fun probably than anything else I've ever done in my whole career, because I was totally in charge.

Q: Speaking about negotiating techniques as an American, did you have your two weeks of bluster that you would go and make things for the record?

VEST: No. I never did it for the following reason. I might have if the situation had called for it. In fact, I always counted it as one of the higher compliments I got from a very distinguished Swedish ambassador who was there, who had been in Moscow and was a

superb man, Ambassador Ruding. Our two governments were not intimate at that time. In fact, they were very cold, very cold.

Q: No, no. With the Vietnam War on, we were down to sub-zero as far as relations at that time.

VEST: But Ruding one day said to me, “I know what you're doing, and I just want to say I think it's exactly right. We do not want this conference to degenerate into a slanging match between the Soviets and the United States. That will obscure everything else. It will change the tone, and it will make it impossible for the rest of us to keep working and emerge with what we want. You've managed to be clear and firm and you never have been angry or intemperate at all, and that has meant that we have kept it a conference of the whole, instead of the two big boys fighting.” So I never did, and it was a deliberate choice on my part.

Q: You really felt like you were in control of the situation?

VEST: I knew I was in control of the situation because I could control, in point of fact, I could control the NATO group. And there already was a European Community group, which were some of the same countries but with Ireland. I could control them, and through the Germans and the Scandinavians, we really controlled the neutrals primarily, particularly Sweden, Austria, people like that. So we really had the preponderance. There was never any question. If we sat there, we could control what happened, and we did. Because we ended up with a staged conference that we decided. We decided where and how it would be set up. We decided what would be the agenda and how far human rights would play into it. All of this was done as what we wanted. None of it was exactly what the Soviets wanted.

Q: And mainly because of almost, I won't say a paralysis, but because of the Kissinger-Rogers sort of impasse. You weren't getting people breathing over your neck from Washington, which can ruin any good negotiation.

VEST: I can't resist just reporting one last one.

Q: Oh, good. Please do.

VEST: Because it symbolized so much this kind of thing. There was this impasse. We were coming to the end of the preparatory talks. The question was, “Where should the formal conferences take place?” It was agreed that the opening stage would take place in Helsinki. The next stage would take place in Geneva, which is more convenient for the mass of people. And then the third and final stage, which would rap up and launch a document, where would that take place?

The Soviets and a great many others were saying, “Well, we'll just stay in Geneva. It will be convenient.” The Scandinavians were saying, “No. To wrap it up formally, let's come back. The third stage should be in Helsinki.” Well, this got to be quite heated, and it was, I felt, obvious that the Russians preferred to have it stay on in Geneva. There have been dozens of proclamations that came out of Geneva, and who remembers which ones they are?

Q: Because now one thinks of Finland and that.

VEST: But if you're going to have something, it ought to be the Helsinki document. It ought to be done in Helsinki. Well, the arguments were going on. Meanwhile, I assured the Scandinavians, “I'm with you and I'll stay with you until the end. We're going to argue this third phase has to be in Helsinki and it'll be a Helsinki document, not a Geneva document.”

I let them know in Washington when the last decisive meeting was going to be, and Washington let me know that they couldn't get any guidance out to me because there was

enough confusion back in Washington. They didn't say with whom, about what, but just that they couldn't get any guidance to me, which was fine. So I said, “Fine. I'm going to do what I want.”

We were having our meeting in the Conference Center, which is just outside Helsinki, the last meeting to decide this. And I got a telephone message passed to me from the embassy saying a telegram with guidance had come in from Washington and was classified. So I immediately responded, “Since it's classified, you cannot tell me anything over the phone so I suggest you send a courier out with the message.” Meanwhile, I roundly supported the Swedes and the Norwegians and the Danes that it would be Helsinki for the third phase.

We were getting near the end of our argument and it was going to have to be agreed, and when the courier came with the envelope for me with the instructions. It was one of the few times, just like a little play, and he tried to hand it to me. I said, “Not now, I'm busy.” So he kept saying, “Here's this instruction,” and I kept saying, “Just not now.” I supported them to the end. We firmly agreed the last phase would be in Helsinki and that it would be the Helsinki document, and I opened my instructions and they said I was to support Geneva. [Laughter] Obviously Kissinger had been gotten to and they let it go through.

Q: It's so interesting because, George, looking back on it now, everybody thinks of the Helsinki Accords, and they know exactly what you're talking about. But, as you say, the Geneva thing, my God, what are you talking about? I mean, hundreds of things have gone on there, it doesn't mean anything. If nothing else, from a very strong PR side. I mean, you're always hearing about the Helsinki group and this and that.

VEST: The Helsinki process.

Q: Yes. Was this in your mind at the time?

VEST: Yes. And it was clearly in the minds of the Scandinavians. The Scandinavians, this Ambassador Ruding whom I referred to, who is still alive, but up in Sweden retired, felt very clearly that we were beginning a process, if it made any difference at all, if it was to matter, we were going to have to call it something special and make it be something special. And there was no question in their minds that's what they were doing. I thought they were right, and I was delighted to go right with them. [Laughter] And I might say, the whole group of the European Community countries were right there with them, as well. And the neutrals were, so there was nobody but the Warsaw Pact and the Soviets, and they caved.

Q: Their ideas was they knew the same thing, and they were trying to dilute this?

VEST: They were trying to dilute it. They hoped to be able to move it all to Geneva and gradually dilute the whole process. Now, of course, conceivably they could have diluted the process in Geneva, and it would mean nothing. But what you did have was something that continued to be fought on in Geneva so that when you did ratify it, you had something worth ratifying.

Q: Well, what was in it for the Soviets to get this agreement?

VEST: What was what?

Q: What was in it for the Soviets to go along with this agreement?

VEST: I believe the Soviets hoped—and here it's very general coming from me—that in this whole activity, they would gradually get the western grouping plus neutrals, which started out very close, that they would gradually get some of the western countries to move over and be more neutralist. In other words, they could divide the western camp. And, of course, in the western camp you have neutral-minded people, certainly in Denmark and Norway, among others, and they were hoping they could split the west.

Years later, I ran into Mendelevich. He was in Washington. They were about to begin in the Carter years on an Indian Ocean negotiation which never got underway. And I think he must have had a little bit to drink or something because we were upstairs on the seventh floor and I said, “Well, I'm delighted to see you're taking on another negotiation with us.” And he said, “Yes. You Americans won the last one. I'm going to win this one.” [Laughter] He recognized that the west had won that negotiation.

Q: I don't know how much I can presume upon you. How are you doing?

VEST: Stop the button for one minute. [Tape interruption]

Q: Coming from this set of negotiations, then you became the director of the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs.

VEST: No. Then I didn't do that either.

Q: I usually can figure out who did what, but yours is confusing.

VEST: One of those unusual things happened. I went on to Geneva, and was only in Geneva a short time for this CSCE negotiation when Henry Kissinger took over as Secretary of State. And Kissinger, I have always assumed, prompted by Larry Eagleburger, who knew me well and had worked with me, invited me to come back and be the press spokesman. So I was the press spokesman for Henry Kissinger when he took over as Secretary of State, and I did it for about eight months, throughout most of the shuttle diplomacy. Traveled with him, dealt with the press, and went out to Moscow with him, and all the things you do as a press spokesman. But we were not really a very compatible couple as a press spokesman, and eventually I just went in one morning and said, “I think you would be happier and I would be happier if you get another press spokesman,” so he did. Then he gave me another job. I thought I was going to be fired, but I didn't get fired.

Q: What was your impression, let's say at this time when you were the spokesman—later on there will be other times—but your impression of Henry Kissinger. These were the first few months of him as Secretary of State.

VEST: These were the first few months and a period when the presidency was more and more under attack, too.

Q: Oh, yes. It was during the Watergate period.

VEST: Watergate was building. It was all right there.

I think he's about the most complex person I've ever had to try to fathom and get along with. He is brilliant. He is brilliantly articulate. He is very insecure as a human being. He is capable of what I consider to be either childish, or playfully misleading, to outright deception, and almost enjoying each them as sort of a game. He's extraordinarily sensitive. That goes with the insecurity. He is capable of being cruel, cruel to the point of sadism, and yet it's not always that. I mean, frequently he does believe you get results from contrived competition.

Q: Can you give any examples that you can think of on how he operated in this field of contrived competition, cruelty?

VEST: It was so much a matter of his day-to-day activity that it would be hard to. I can't really pull a single thing out. What is equally remarkable about this hopeless man to work around was, he brought together, because of his gifts, he also brought together a group of extraordinarily talented, dedicated people who continued to work in this context. I mean, people like Larry Eagleburger, Win Lord, Joe Sisco, Roy Atherton. You know, you can go right on through. There were superb people who worked for him. Personally, I admired his qualities, particularly his capacity, of his brilliance, to try to look ahead to perceive further down the road. Not a quality that Americans are very much given to. Well, I admired it all.

I found him such a distasteful human being to be around, closely around. This is why I left as a press spokesman.

Q: How did he treat you? I mean, as his press spokesman, in some ways, is supposed to be the Secretary's alter ego the way it's used.

VEST: I would have to say he was very, and basically, he was pretty nice to me. I had one episode, which early on may have been the best episode one could have. I came in and he was going to brief me for the noon briefing, which he normally did each day. We had a little talk about what to say and what to avoid. And the phone rang and it was Al Haig, then heading the NSC. I offered to leave the room, and Kissinger said, “No, just go over there by the window and wait.” And they were talking about the deputy Secretary of State, Ken Rush, and I could tell from the conversation that Haig was saying that they were thinking about having Ken Rush come over and be one of the counselors in the White House. And Kissinger said, “Look. This man is so stupid.” He went on and on in the most derogatory terms about what an ass he was and how hopeless he was, and if there was one thing he didn't want, he didn't want that kind of a man in the White House.” And he told Al Haig, “Whatever you do, prevent that from happening, because this man is a mess. He's not worth anything.”

He then picked up the phone and called Rush and said in the most endless, syrupy way, “Ken, I've had some rumor that you might be wanted to go somewhere else, and I just want you to know that I can't possibly get along without you. There's no known way I can carry all the burdens I'm doing if I didn't have you here. You are my strong right arm, etc., etc., etc. And I depend on you, and so on and so on.” And when it was all over, I just turned to him and said, “Mr. Secretary, anytime you're not satisfied with the way I do my job, please just tell it to me straight. I'm a Foreign Service officer. I can go off and do something else. Don't beat around the bush. Just tell me you don't like the way I'm doing something.” In retrospect, that was probably the healthiest thing I ever did, because it set a sort of relationship.

He was devious. Then I also early on found I had another situation. I remember we were in London, and I had a telephone call. I was in his suite at the time, and I had a telephone call from one of the major newspaper pundits saying, “I hear Henry Kissinger is saying all kinds of nasty things about my newest columns, and I'm very unhappy and I just want to make sure he knows how upset I am about this.” And I knew that I'd heard Henry Kissinger saying all kinds of nasty things and I said, “Well, Joe, don't worry. I'll make sure that this message is passed.”

Secretary Kissinger came back. I told him about it, and he said, “Well, call him back right away and tell him that those reports that he's heard, that those reports are all lies.”

Now I knew they weren't lies. So I thought a minute and I said, “Well, very well, Mr. Secretary. I will call him back and tell him that you say they are all lies.”

And he thought about that a minute, and he said, “Well, on further thought, maybe I'd better call him myself.” But there was that kind of an uncertainty, as far as I was concerned.

Brilliant. Nobody can question that. But for a Secretary of State, there are two or three qualities. One is brilliance, far-seeing thought. Another is reliability. You know, when I look at various Secretaries of State, I have a feeling that there are a great many times when Mr. Vance and Mr. Shultz got more trust and more out—certainly of our friends in other countries—because they had total confidence in these two men. And they could not be sure, particularly as time has gone on and he was making all his stories and telling what he's told, they could not be sure of Henry Kissinger.

Q: Well, it goes back to what you learned in Quito, and that is you never lie as a diplomat. The Secretary of State is the top diplomat.

VEST: Yes.

Q: Did you run across when you were there, or maybe even later on because we're talking about Henry Kissinger, about, say, the problem that I've had come up in some of these interviews, particularly about Iran where you don't report on the—

VEST: Maybe we better stop.

Q: Why don't we stop right here. [Tape interruption]

One thing I'd like to ask—we're talking about Henry Kissinger—in the people around you and what you knew, what was some of the impressions that they had of dealing with him? In some of these interviews I've heard horror stories, for example, in Iran of saying, “Don't report anything against the Shah. The Shah's our friend, and only report on one side on this.” This is to the political counselor, Andy Kilgore. I mean, there are things of this nature of wanting to have everything fit within a framework. Were there mutterings within the Foreign Service and the State Department because of this?

VEST: There were mutterings. I first ran up against it when I took over as director of the political and military office. I hadn't been there too long before the question came up of giving a certain...

Q: You were there from 1974 to '77?

VEST: Yes, that's right. After I resigned as press spokesman, thinking it was the end of my career, again I didn't understand Henry Kissinger. He sent word and asked me if I'd like to be—he was on his honeymoon; I had arranged it and then given up the job—and he said, “Would you like to do this job?” and I said, “Well, sure.” So there I was.

There was a very, very delicate missile system which hadn't been given to anybody, and there were many reasons why it shouldn't be given to the Shah. He had heard about it. And I felt, well, at least we should argue and put all the aspects up to Henry Kissinger before we went along with the disposition of the military to go ahead and make this missile

system available to the Shah. The only evidence that I deliberately came up against of the kind of thing you're talking about was a number of people said to me, “There isn't any point in doing anything like that. He doesn't want to hear that. He's got his general rule already made up. Anything the Shah wants, the Shah will get, so there's no point in even trying to tell him there's a down side to any of it.” We sent up, I would have to say, a relatively moderate message, a memo, to the Secretary on the disadvantages of this, and as far as I know, it was never read. I've never had any evidence that anyone had ever received it.

Q: How about in other matters? Was there the feeling, well, let's not present too many things to the Secretary because once he has made up his mind, that's it and this is a windmill against which not to tilt?

VEST: I really can't say, because there was a strange mixture in Henry Kissinger. Certainly, some people constantly gave him things he didn't want to listen to. Win Lord was one, and Win Lord saw it as his job heading the policy planning staff to stimulate Henry Kissinger to think about areas he didn't want to think about. Economics and agriculture.

Q: South America and Africa.

VEST: South America and Africa. You know, a whole series of these. And Henry Kissinger respected Win Lord enough that he would stop and look over, but there was only a small handful of people for whom he would stop. Now once he stopped, he was very serious. I was involved in it because Win Lord put up to him the problem of nuclear energy—this is public nuclear energy—nuclear energy proliferation which could proliferate into a military danger, and made Henry interested enough so that Henry authorized the nuclear negotiation with the major countries—Russia, Japan, Britain, Canada, Germany and so on, France. And I did the nuclear supplier negotiation for Mr. Kissinger, which ran on for about a year and a half, and we worked out the basic nuclear supplier guidelines for the nuclear supplier countries, which are still the fundamental guide on what kind of technology and material you sell and turnover to other people.

Now Henry Kissinger wasn't interested in this at all, but Win Lord got him to do it. He got him to Africa. [Laughter] But you had to be very, very sure of yourself in dealing with Kissinger, and only a few people were that sure. Win Lord was, Larry Eagleburger was, Hal Saunders was, who worked in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. They were among the few who really could make Henry Kissinger stop and think about something. He had the understandable arrogance, intellectual arrogance, of a man who's normally right and normally sees further than most other people.

Q: Well, isn't there, too, the problem of somebody who looks upon the world as something which you can manipulate. Therefore, this is very, in a way, European, rather than what you're talking about. Looking at your career, which is essentially a very random one which is bouncing over, but one can look at it and say, "Well, you're a European specialist and you did this and that." I mean, it looks like a very well- planned, thought-out career, and it's not. You then moved down to the Bureau of Political Military Affairs. What did that mean at the time? What did you do?

VEST: A very strange mixed bag, I discovered. Technically, we were responsible to be involved in MBFR negotiations, and had some people who were true experts in that area. But Henry Kissinger normally had that taken care of by Hal Sonnenfeldt. We had, and did carry through, all of the negotiations and activities and follow-up activities associated with bases worldwide that led you to everything from Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean, special activities with Australia and other nations out in the Pacific, or elsewhere. There were a great many political and military arrangements with one country or another which, for the most part, were relatively highly classified. We did manage all of those negotiations and were the linchpin with the Defense Department for all of that.

We did the same thing for the control of the sale of military hardware. The Political and Military Bureau controls, is the controller, licenser, for the sale of a great percentage of our military hardware if it's being just publicly sold and bought by people in the country. We were the manager for the complete military supply arrangements worldwide. Wherever

there was security assistance, it was centrally run and controlled out of the Political and Military Bureau. That and many others. I mean, it was also one of those areas when we got to the question of what should we do about, as I mentioned earlier, the regular nuclear supply issues, there was a question where it would go. In the end, it was put in the Political and Military Bureau, although it might well have been in the Scientific Bureau. And in fact, the assistant secretary was Dixie Lee Ray, former head of the AEC.

Q: For oceans and scientific affairs.

VEST: In all of that. And in the end, it was put in the Political and Military Bureau, and I given the negotiation responsibility for all those things. So it was somewhat of a mixed bag. It did not get into the heartland, SALT, and MBFR negotiations, which it might normally have done, but Kissinger carefully kept that to Sonnenfeldt and his own little sort of inner grouping. I knew that was just one of the things you had to face.

Q: George, I'm working now with our oral history program to develop a set of interviews using- -Tom Stern is working on this- -to do a set of interviews on arms sales. Because this is something, again to somebody not involved in this, looks like we're doing an awful lot. We talk peace, peace, peace, but when the chips are down, our bargaining chips seems to be send some more tanks or airplanes to countries, particularly to the Middle East. We are proliferating weapons all over the place in competition or something with the French and the British and the Israelis and the Soviets. When you were there—we're talking about '74 to '77—how did the bureau view weapons being sold or given to various countries?

VEST: We had a general policy guidance which, generally speaking, was very permissive. I just have to say that was the normal approach.

Q: Well, what was the philosophy behind

VEST: The philosophy was a combination in the positive sense. We may not be able to give you money to influence you, but we can give you arms and that will influence you. And on the negative sense, if we don't do it, someone else will. I'm just extrapolating in the simplistic way. But there was very little question in that period that we should be involved in it.

Now for me it was an interesting evolution, because when in 1958 I was engaged with Norstad in the sale—or delivery in many cases, not the sale—of any amount of military hardware to restore our NATO allies to strength. So that was one kind of basis. But by the time I came back to it again in this period in the mid '70s, it was a tool for influence with no particular rationale as to restraint. It had become accepted as a tool of influence.

Q: Because I think it obviously is wide open to question. I mean, looking at it today, do you make for a better world by putting your money into swords and not into plowshares, and then dumping them in places where they can be used.

VEST: Exactly.

Q: So you're saying that there weren't people, a la George Ball, or somebody like this, saying, “Hey, wait a minute. What are we doing?”

VEST: Not in Henry Kissinger's time, not at all. It was not a part of his sort of rare politic.

Q: How much did the arms merchants play? I mean, did you find yourself being sort of their salesmen? Or were they influential? Was this mainly policy or was this arms?

VEST: If there were arms sales influences, they came in through the Pentagon. They didn't come to us in the Political and Military Bureau at all. And I know they did have their influence, because that was when I first began to be offered outside jobs. [Laughter] I won't mention which arms companies and which aircraft companies came to me and

asked me would I like to retire and work for them. My wife and I discussed it, and I said, “No, we don't need money.” [Laughter] But, no, it didn't affect us.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the Pentagon, in savings of quantity or whatever you might say, was pushing the delivery of sales, or is it just the only thing they knew to play with and hand out guns?

VEST: Honestly, Stu, I had no real feeling one way or the other. The level of people that I was dealing with in ISA, when we talked about arms sales and deliveries and special terms and all the rest to go to this or that place, there was always a rationale attached to it. We want to strengthen this part of the world and we want to short circuit this or that and so on. So there was always a rationale given, but there was very little thought given to the fact that, well, maybe it would just be better not to spread those arms around at all. I mention the one time that we tried and it didn't get anywhere. The idea was clearly that whatever the Shah wanted, he should have.

Q: Well, I must say that, although I didn't follow these things. I mean, I was on the normal Foreign Service gossip circuit and all and it was in the papers and all, but there was real concern of what the hell are we doing in Iran, of dumping all these things there. This is not a very safe place. I mean, it wasn't a surprise, and there was great concern, both in public and sort of, at least in the Foreign Service, about putting this stuff there. But you were there, part of the pipeline. What did you feel about this?

VEST: As I said, we tried just once and then I was told very clearly, “Look, there's a policy decision.” I thought it was foolish and short-sighted and I regretted it, but I'd have to say I didn't take it much further.

Q: Well, I was wondering. Were there any people who dealt with the Middle East who had come by and say, “George, my God. You know, Iran just isn't that stable a place”?

VEST: It's interesting. Out of everybody in that building in that period that I can remember, I remember only one person who came by—and maybe I didn't know some of the people who were worrying, obviously—but I just remember one person, who was in the policy planning staff, who was deeply upset and felt, “Look, we're getting ourselves way down into something very, very wrong and ultimately dangerous. We shouldn't be sending all of this there at this stage. We're feeding somebody who's not got the right balance.” And this particular person in the policy planning staff in due course fell into disfavor, I noticed. In fact, he left the Government after that.

Q: Who?

VEST: I cannot think of his name right away. Oh, I know. Tom Thornton. But I didn't get it from anyone else. Nobody in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs ever came by emitting even a moo of discontent.

Q: How about the pouring of arms both into Israel, and then were you there when we were beginning to do it into Egypt?

VEST: We had many discussions about the fact that we seemed to be buying an arrangement between Israel and Egypt by virtue of giving them almost the most of our aid and an enormous amount of our military equipment and, among other things, also talking about nuclear reactors before we were through. There were big arguments, but they were, I would have to say, I was not allowed to be part of it. But this was a very large and very precise policy decision which the Secretary of State took at the level of his top advisors.

Q: Am I right in saying the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs was, at least in policy matters, there would be the Near Eastern Bureau and the European Bureau, which would be at basically a somewhat higher level in the technical?

VEST: Absolutely right. I would say that the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs distinctly had a second rank in all these matters.

Q: It technically was of equal rank?

VEST: Well, all bureaus are technically alike in point of fact. Normally the geographic bureaus have the largest say in life. This is a natural consequence of the structure in the State Department. Other bureaus from time to time have more weight—INR, Pol-Mil, international organizations, policy planning staff and that sort. Certainly in the period when I was there, I would say it was strictly in a second-class category.

Q: I would like to move on then when you moved to the next higher ramp, which was the assistant secretary for EUR, which has always been of, I think one can almost say, paramount interest. When the chips are down, our concern about European Affairs has remained constant, whereas from time to time in the Middle East they'll flare up and in the Far East. Never for Africa or Latin America, except for aberrations under recent administration. How did this job come about? You were there from 1977 to '81, which is exactly the Carter years.

VEST: How it came about is very clear cut. Chance is the largest element, and it's really quite true. [Laughter] In fact, I was due to go to be the ambassador to Pakistan. I had the agr#ment, everything. What happened was the Carter Administration offered the job of ambassador to Paris to three— or maybe four, I don't know; Art Hartman might know— political appointees, each of which turned it down.

Q: Good God.

VEST: So, for whatever their Democratic reasons were, and the White House said to Secretary Vance, new in this job, “Would you like to send a career officer to be the ambassador to France?” So he had known him for sometime before and he was still there, Arthur Hartman, was at that stage our assistant secretary for European affairs.

Vance asked Arthur, “Would you like to be the ambassador to France?” and in whatever length of time was necessary, Arthur said, “But, yes.” After which they looked around, as I understand it, and said, “And now if you're going to go there, we've got to get a replacement.” And I don't know who recommended me to Mr. Vance, but I was due to go up the next day to appear before the Foreign Relations Committee to go to Pakistan, and I was told by Mr. Vance, “Don't go. I want you to be the assistant secretary for European affairs.” And I've never known whether it was Arthur Hartman's doing or whose doing, but anyway, it was just like that.

Q: How did the transition work between the Ford Administration and the Carter Administration, because the next change was not a nice one in a way? But how about between these two?

VEST: This transition, as far as I could see it, was a very neat and comfortable one. Vance and Brzezinski and the others who were coming down who would have something to do with foreign policy, from at least some of my observation had a very clear picture as to whom they wanted to bring down to do jobs. But they were very considerate of the outgoing administration. Secretary Kissinger was able to say to Secretary Vance, “I have these people I recommend to you, and I think you should do something for them.”

Instead of the people being considered suspect, Mr. Vance carefully took note of that. I mean, these were the people who had worked for Kissinger. Arthur Hartman went to Paris. Larry Eagleburger went to Belgrade. I took over as assistant secretary for European affairs. There could hardly have been more open kind of treatment than we had right then and there. And Roy Atherton went as ambassador to Cairo. So, you see, we were given very, very, I would say, courteous, thoughtful treatment.

Similarly, as we took over, and I can say this as assistant secretary of European affairs, there was never any reserve at all from the word go. You had been given that job, you were given the credit that you were going to be a true professional, honest advisor to the

best of your ability and you were part of the team. And we were treated that way from the beginning.

Q: Where did this come from? Was this from the President, do you think? Or was it Vance?

VEST: I think it was primarily Mr. Vance. Mr. Vance had had long experience in government. He had worked under several administrations. He didn't have the least hesitation about what he expected and how he wanted them to do, and people responded to him. Now he brought with him an inner group, as does everybody, Dick Moose and quite a number of them, but I would have to say within a matter of a month, they were all working very, very comfortably together with those of us who had stayed on from the other administration. I didn't have a feeling of being a second-class type at all.

Q: Did you have a feeling of a shifting of policy gears as far with the new administration? I mean, a real major shift as far as European affairs were concerned?

VEST: No. Fundamentally, no. A couple of things were. Europe is one of the easiest places to have continuity. Major areas when you look at it. You have a Soviet Union with whom you wish to explore when it's possible. That didn't change, because you went right on with your SALT-type negotiations. Western allies strong support for NATO never changed at all. Carter went right off to a heads of government meeting in London.

Support for the European Community, that continued as well. There was never any question about that, and we didn't happen to have very large economic dislocations at that point. Support for the military. What is not normally realized is that in conjunction with all this, Carter began a rather careful increase of military budgets, military support, which is all again tied into western Europe.

Eastern Europe, for in spite of anything which might have been said by Mr. Brzezinski, we continued just what had existed before, which was a policy of looking at each member of

the Warsaw Pact as an individual, separate entity with which you tried to do business, and it might be different depending on how that particular country acted. So the larger policy directions, it seemed to me, were still being carried forward. This is more true probably of Europe than it would be of anyplace else.

Q: Yes. You couldn't play the human rights angle or things like that.

VEST: You can play the human rights angle, but only up to a point.

Q: And then that would only be in eastern Europe.

VEST: And that would only be in eastern Europe, and you cannot force our allies to go but so far. You began to have your differences when the Soviets acted up. For example, the Soviets go into Iran—I mean Afghanistan—you've got a problem. What do you do about the Olympics? You see that. Then you begin to have differences of attitude of how to react to something, but our fundamental relationships stayed on track.

Q: What was the role of Brzezinski as you saw it then?

VEST: Brzezinski for me is a little hard to keep in perspective, because you had a very interesting phenomenon. You had Henry Kissinger act to head the NSC and completely distort the emphasis that had been there and for which it was originally set up. And then along came Brzezinski—and very interesting with his background and Kissinger's background— Brzezinski set out, if anything, to outdo Kissinger. He is, by my standards, a sort of small-bore Kissinger. Noisier, but less wise. He had very strong antipathies. I mean, he was by temperament so strongly anti-Soviet—or anti-Russian—and anti- German. These are things that only a Pole could so strongly be, and it came out over and over again.

He was ready at the beginning of the four years of the Carter Administration, he was ready to believe that the Germans are just about to have another Rapallo, look out. I mean, which was completely silly at the time.

Q: Another what?

VEST: Another Rapallo.

Q: Oh, a Rapallo. Oh, yes.

VEST: An agreement with the east.

Q: The Rapallo Pact of 1920-something.

VEST: Yes. He was so worried about the Soviets, when we got ready to set up a committee that would pull together all of the actions of the various agencies of government in relation to the Soviets as we opened up our way of doing things with them, that initially he was going to insist that that committee had to be chaired by him, or somebody over in the NSC. I went to him and I said, “You know, that is a fundamental policy responsibility of the Secretary of State, and I won't agree to it. I will take it to Mr. Vance, and I believe Mr. Vance will take it to the President.” And we had really quite a knockdown, drag out discussion of it.

I had known Brzezinski and his deputy both before.

Q: Who's his deputy?

VEST: His deputy was...

Q: We can fill it in.

VEST: It'll come back. As a young Foreign Service officer, he worked for me in the '60s—David Aaron—and I knew David very well and had kept up with him casually when he left the Foreign Service.

But Brzezinski was so worried about Marshall Shulman, whom he thought was terribly soft on the Russians.

Q: Marshall Shulman was...

VEST: Was the special senior advisor on Soviet affairs in the State Department for Mr. Vance.In the end, I persuaded Brzezinski, “Let us set up this committee and Marshall Shulman and I will be joint chairmen for the committee, and we will always insist that you have a senior representative from the NSC sitting on the committee,” which is the way we got around it. But he was very suspicious. He was very intrusive. He did not play fair. He would do things behind people's back. Mr. Vance, I know many times, complained about it, and Mr. Vance is the kind of person who never spoke ill of anybody. He was one of those greatly reserved and dignified gentlemen.

One day he and I were, I think it was in Italy, and we were swimming in the ambassadorial swimming pool after one of those big dinners, and we would paddle up and down. Vance and I were alone there. The guard was standing nearby. And he said in an outburst—which for him was an outburst—he said, “What I cannot understand about Brzezinski is, you know, over and over he lies to me.” And Mr. Vance, couldn't believe that someone in that position would just lie to him.

And I said to Mr. Vance, “Well, I know what you mean, but I think Brzezinski is fundamentally in many ways an adolescent who thinks it's fun to try to get around and to tell stories and get around somebody. There's no other explaining an adult acting the way he does.”

Q: What was Secretary Vance's interest in European affairs as opposed to other ones? How did you deal with him?

VEST: Mr. Vance was very, very close to the other foreign ministers of the major western powers— Genscher, Peter Carrington, the French, the Italians, and so on. He is a living example—I mentioned earlier—that you can build up trust and it can take you far, and these other foreign ministers certainly had confidence in him. I can't cite you an example, but I can just remember so many. I just have this picture over and over again. When he told them something—in the earlier time it was David Owen, not Peter Carrington—when he told them something nobody ever questioned that Mr. Vance was telling them the nearest thing to the truth that he could give. In other words, they trusted him and respected him.

And when we were talking to them about what was going on in Iran, when we wanted them to freeze Iranian assets, when we talked to them about what was our policy in response to Afghanistan, he was someone who they just totally respected. It was a period when as time went by, as you know, the President's public prestige went down, down, down, not necessarily correct that it should have, but it did. And all of that was being picked up in the newspapers and repeated in the European newspapers, and in that context, when Mr. Vance said something, they listened. In Germany, especially, this was the case. I would say in Germany, it was the most valuable of them all.

Q: I'm going to ask. Looking back on this period, I would think that our relationship with Germany was probably the most crucial in that period. Would you agree with me?

VEST: Yes.

Q: And this was not helped by the fact that we had two men, one named Carter and the other was Helmut Schmidt, who, I take it, it was almost visceral, a dislike between the two. Is this a correct perception?

VEST: This is a correct perception, but you'd have to also make it a three-man operation, because Brzezinski was there feeding Carter all the time. Now, Helmut Schmidt was not one of the easy people in the world.

Q: He was at that time a chancellor of West Germany?

VEST: He was the chancellor. He was very pro- American underneath. He was very pro-NATO. He was keeping the Socialist Party of Germany on the moderate direction.

Q: He was head of the Socialist Party.

VEST: A bulk, probably a majority of the Socialists, would have gone further to the left, and he was keeping them where he did in relation to our activities in NATO, in relation to the Soviets, you know, whatever you want to call it. Every time there was a chance, Brzezinski would add to the problem, and there were many episodes when I watched it. I mean, I can remember when it's typical of it.

We had a visit. There was a question of what you should say in relation to the Middle East. Von Schaden, representing the Germans, and I sat down and we worked out a public statement, which I think was a fair public statement. It certainly was acceptable to Hal Saunders and Roy Atherton, who were the Near Eastern experts. And when it was telephone over to the White House, Brzezinski went to the President and said, “Oh, this is much too difficult. This is not something we should say. Much too hard on Israel,” blaming Schmidt for causing all the trouble when this was not something that Schmidt himself had negotiated nor had any of us. It was the compromise we thought we'd found.

Later at the dinner, I happened to be talking to Carter, and he mentioned it, you know. I said, “What a splendid toast you'd given.” He said, “Well, I don't owe him anything after what he did on that statement on the Middle East.” So he clearly was blaming Schmidt when Schmidt wasn't the one.

Later Schmidt, in the middle of the SALT treaty, Schmidt had been to Bohemian Grove—interesting enough, I think as the guest of George Shultz, then of Bechtel.

Q: Bohemian Grove being a fancy place up in the Redwoods that rich industrialists and all used, outside of San Francisco.VEST: The most powerful people of the west gather for that meeting.

He flew in. We had total warning. We all knew about it. Ambassador Von Schaden and I went out. It was said that Brzezinski would be out at the airport. Schmidt would just step down and then transfer to a German military plane and go on from Dulles. We got there and we waited. Nobody turned up from the NSC. I telephoned. They said, “Oh, Brzezinski has it all under control.” Brzezinski never turned up. Nobody turned up.

So Schmidt, the chancellor, gets out of the plane, nobody is there from the White House to visit him after he's been told to expect somebody there, and I did the best I could. I've known him for a number of years, and he had a meeting of the press in which he proceeded to say, “Every European leader of any responsibility whatsoever fully supports President Carter's magnificent SALT II treaty. We are all delighted with it. His leadership is fundamental and indispensable for us all.”

He went right all the way through, because the press were there ready, primed by the Senate discussion, to attack the SALT II treaty. He delivered it all, and turned to me at the end as he was getting on the plane. I just drove out with him, and as he got ready to go up the runway he said, “And now, George, I have been a good boy.” [Laughter] Got on the plane, and God knows what he said to his people on his way back to Germany. But, you know, just a common courtesy had been turned into an insult, and he knew it.

Q: What about Carter, Schmidt, and the neutron bomb? Was that part of your business? You might explain what it is.

VEST: Yes. Well, the idea behind the neutron bomb— time has gone through enough, Stu, I'm vague myself about much of it. But the idea was to have a particular kind of bomb, and that you might even remember better than I what it's functioning was and what made it so delicate.

Q: I think, if I recall, it radiated. It other words, it would kill people without killing property.

VEST: That's right, it radiated. It would kill people without blowing up buildings.

Q: And, although it was called the true capitalist thing preserving property, I think the military rationale behind it was that if you created too much rubble, it made the battlefield dirty in order to operate.

VEST: And it would be disadvantageous to you to do your job.

Q: To run your tanks or something like that.

VEST: And that's why the bomb was created.

Q: But it was not portrayed that way.

VEST: It became quickly portrayed as “it kills people.”

Q: And protects property.

VEST: Protects property. Nevertheless, we fought hard for it. All I can tell you is the following. We took it up in NATO, and we took it up with the Germans and the British as the key players in this. Both the Germans and the British had agreed to back it. We even had a scenario, just like a play, in which everybody was going to say in the NATO Council. So it was all clear, you know, what we were going to do, and it was due to happen next week. The next thing I knew I got a telephone call at home from Mr. Vance. It was on a

Sunday, I think, but I was at home, and he said, “George, I just want you to know that none of it is going to happen. The President has vetoed the whole thing.”

And I said, “Why?”

And he said, “Well, I don't have enough details to be able to tell you here and now on the phone.” What I was told later, I talked to people like Stu Eizenstat and others who were in the White House. Stu Eizenstat said, “It was very clear. Mr. Carter himself told me that Brzezinski himself told him that the Germans were going to back out.”

I said, “But the Germans weren't about to back out. They'd already signed on to a whole scenario.” Well, that's what Mr. Carter believed was that the Germans were going to back out so he would drop it first, even after we had gone so far. So, in the end, that is what happened.

Q: For you, the real cleanup came afterwards, didn't it?

VEST: The real cleanup came later. I accompanied Warren Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State, and we flew over to Germany to try to explain. . .

Q: The inexplicable.

VEST: . . . to the Germans. We first stopped in Bonn and saw Genscher, who was relieved to have the thing go because he particularly didn't like it. And then we flew onto Hamburg and called on Schmidt, and Schmidt was in his private home there, and known to be a totally tempestuous man, at best.

Christopher and I both were frankly very worried, and Ambassador Walt Stoessel flew down from Bonn.

Q: He was our ambassador.

VEST: He was our ambassador to Bonn. And the three of us met with Schmidt, and the only other person there was Jurgen Ruhfus, who is now the German ambassador to Washington, who was then the sort of chef de cabinet for Schmidt. Mrs. Schmidt was there and saw us into the dining room. We all sat around the table. She carefully served us all some beer and it was all very nice, and Schmidt was very cool. He did make the point. He said, “You realize that I personally, personally, had to threaten to resign to make the government in Bonn, the Bundestag, agree to going ahead with this. And I only did this about a day and a half ago, and now you have done this.”

Mr. Christopher did the best one could of this, and I don't remember too much what he said because it wasn't very easy and very convincing, and we left. And flying out, the three of us, Stoessel, Christopher and I, Christopher said, “Well, I don't understand. You warned me how tempestuous and difficult Schmidt was, but he seemed to be very controlled. He didn't seem to be upset at all.”

Walt Stoessel and I both jumped in just about the same time saying exactly the same thing, that, “Look, it's too serious to be excited about and lose your self-control because, from his point of view, the leader of the free world has just signaled to the world outside that he doesn't have the guts to follow through on something.” And from Schmidt's point of view, that's what it was, and he no longer had respect for Carter as a leader after that. And both Walt and I agreed this is exactly what it was. And he was. He was just as cool as could be. What a wonderful period.

Q: During that period, was there any other particular moments or areas of major concern?

VEST: In the earlier stages, we had Greece, Turkey. We had to resume—this was almost more politics in our country than over there—we had to resume the sale and delivery of arms to Turkey. We had stopped it because of the Cyprus situation.

Q: That was the Cyprus situation in July of '74?

VEST: Yes. And we went to the Senate. It was approved. I met sort of steadily with Sarbanes and Brademas and the other Greek-American people on the Hill.

Q: It's interesting how powerful the Greek lobby is. I mean, one always thinks of the Israeli and Jewish lobby, but the Greek is probably, well, second.

VEST: It's second. I mean, I've had a lot of personal experience with each.

Q: Each being the congressional...

VEST: The Jewish-American lobbies—and without any question, the most powerful lobby in political terms inside our country—but I think equally there's no question the Greek-American lobby, much, much smaller, much more pointed in its concerns, is the next most effective. They are absolutely fantastically well organized and able.

Q: Why did we want to resume arms shipments to Turkey?

VEST: You had the case of a NATO ally who, really, whose armaments were frankly beginning to be out of date, limited. You know, the armed forces were getting to be genuinely in a bad way. And as a NATO ally, you had two things. You were, one, having an increasingly, poorly armed ally; and second, you were creating increasing strains inside a society, which is a rather shallow, western-oriented society where the military represented a major component factor. And so, in NATO terms, there was a very, very strong desire to help, go ahead and modernize the Turkish military.

Q: Looking at it from both the NATO and the European...

VEST: It wasn't having any affect on the Cyprus situation.

Q: Looking at the Greek-Turkish business from the point of view of European affairs—American view of European affairs— and NATO, how important did we find Greece in this? Greece, in a way, seems to spend most of its time pointed towards Turkey rather than

Bulgaria or something like that. Was Greece something we almost would discount and were more concerned about Turkey from a military support of NATO point of view?

VEST: You can never discount either one of them. Geographically, they are both in extraordinary...

Q: You were saying that Greece points at Turkey, and Turkey points at Greece, too.

VEST: And both are absolutely delicate pieces of real estate in relation to the eastern Mediterranean and the Soviet world, so you constantly have to try to have them do something that is constructive and to have them point less at each other. And that has been the role of these two countries inside NATO ever since they joined. There's never been any major difference in this kind of approach on their part. And it still is.

Q: How did you deal with this? Was this something that you spent a lot of time on?

VEST: The only thing I can say is I dealt with it by virtue of the fact that I was good friends with the diplomatic people on both sides. And we were constantly negotiating on Cyprus, trying to get the sides to come together in Cyprus and to get the Turks, who were part of it, to work with us, and there never was that opportune moment where the parties involved, all of them, really were ready, because the Greek Cypriots never really wanted to settle, as far as from my point of view.

I had the good fortune that key people in the Greek foreign office were people I had known, and the equivalent of assistant secretary for political military affairs in the Turkish foreign office, one of the most powerful at that time because he was the one the military trusted, he was someone I had known as a junior officer when I started in NATO. He was their most recent ambassador here, Ambassador Elekdag. He and I had known each other since we were very junior officers, so I could always really speak very, very candidly and openly and work with them.

You did your best to soft-pedal the differences, to restrain them, and to remind them that they had this other concern they needed to watch, as well. There are only moments when Greeks and Turks are really ready to do things together, and you have to capitalize on those moments. Now none of those moments honestly came in the four years that I was assistant secretary for European affairs. A little later, when Ozal more recently was made head of the Turkish Government, you hit one of those moments and they've had a much better rapport. Not a rapport, but a relationship, in more recent years. Otherwise, it's very difficult always.

Q: Before we move to your next assignment, were there any other matters that maybe we should cover in the '77 to '81 period in Europe?

VEST: I don't think so, but one. We talked about Mr. Vance's difficulties with Brzezinski. I'd like to put in another kind of plug in terms of what can be achieved with the NSC. I mentioned that I had the good fortune that David Aaron, who was the deputy head of the NSC, I'd known at any earlier time when we were younger and we had known and kept up with each casually.

I worked with the NSC on European matters for four years. Successfully I had one, whoever was the responsible one for European affairs. I never had formal committees, or joint committees, with the NSC on Europe ever. I avoided them for all four years, but I brought over whoever was responsible in the NSC for European affairs frequently to have lunch with me, or I would go over and have lunch with him. When I went overseas, I was very generous in inviting that particular person, whoever was in the job at the time, to go along with me, as long as they did not report independently.

Once one of them reported independently and I could tell, and I called him in. I said, “If it's ever done again, I'll never let you go anywhere with me again. But if you want to be inside with me, fine. Don't ever report independently.” And they never did, as far as I could see. But I took these people with me, and when Brzezinski wanted a special IG (a high level

study group with NSC), as they called it, on Germany, I never had one. I just said, “I don't need one. We'll keep talking here. We'll keep in touch.” So I had a very happy relationship in that sense that I got along, we did the job. It took extra work, but then our government was set up that way and we made it work. And the people who had that job—one was Bob Blackwill, who is now over in the NSC working for the present administration—and others, we got along all right. So you can make almost any—I think the real essence of what I'm saying is, if you get people of reasonable probity and reasonable goodwill, you can make anything work, even if it's the wrong kind of structure. But it takes a little extra time, a little extra work. But it did work, and I was very grateful to them because they played it straight with me and we made it work.

Q: Well, then a new administration came in, the Reagan Administration, in 1981, in which for the first four years you served as the ambassador to the European Communities. How did this come about, because I would have thought this would have been a political plum for somebody? This was as close to a hostile takeover as one can have ideologically, and there was an awful lot, on the part of the Reagan Administration, of people who have worked for the previous administration, even in professional capacities, as being tainted, if not worse. So how did you get this job?

VEST: I'm not entirely sure, but you're quite right. I would have said I had double jeopardy for that new crowd coming in. I had worked for Henry Kissinger and for Carter. Either one of them was a little bit of a taint. [Laughter]

There may have been several factors. Haig had known me. He had been Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and an able one, when I was assistant secretary for European affairs, so we knew each other vaguely, not well. Larry Eagleburger was working closely. He had taken over as assistant secretary of the European affairs, and he and I had known each other for years and we knew each other well and were friends. So, inside the building at least, I had friendships or acquaintanceships.

My name was sent over by Haig for a couple of embassies. Each time, the White House turned them down flat. So I had come to the conclusion that I was not really the kind of person they wanted, and for lack of anything else to do, I had been doing some projects for the new Deputy Secretary of State, Judge Clark, whom I found to be a very pleasant man and easy to do things for. He was very forthright in starting out by saying what he didn't know and “tell me what I should do about this and that.” So I was in the middle of a particular project for him.

I discussed it with the director general at the time, “Shouldn't I just retire?” and the director general said, “I think you should. We've submitted your name enough times to know that the White House isn't going to let you do anything.”

And so I went in, on a Tuesday it was, and said to Judge Clark, “I just want you to know I'm going to be retiring, and almost right away, but I wanted you to know that this project I'm doing, I will get somebody else to carry this project on. So I just wanted you to be aware of the change.”

And I never will know all the details. Judge Clark simply said to me, “You're going to retire?”

And I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Do you want to retire?”

I said, “No, not specially, but I don't want to hang around if I don't have some work to do.”

And he said, “Well, just hang on for a few days.” And on Thursday he came back and said, “How would you like to be the ambassador to the European Community?”

I said, “Well, I'd love it.” [Laughter] I had never thought of it. And that's it. And I've never known who was responsible.

Q: Well, obviously he was a very close, personal friend of President Reagan and probably could override the normal, political appointee-types in the White House.

VEST: But it was as quick as that, and he was always extremely nice to me afterwards. He was instrumental, when the usual slowness was going on, he was instrumental in simply calling and saying to everybody, including the security people, “Speed this up. We need to get him over there right away.” And later, when he was in the White House heading the NSC, when senior people came over from the European Commission— he didn't like too much to get involved in seeing people like that—he would always take time to see them. So I always have to have a soft spot for Judge Clark. [Chuckles]

Q: You were ambassador there from 1981 to '85. What were your prime concerns at that time?

VEST: Let me make a sort of a general umbrella statement. When I was there as a DCM, you remember I said I could see that we were reaching the stage that we were unprepared to pay, but just so much economically for the political advantage of a movement, toward uniting Europe. By the time I went there, and I had watched it through in the remaining period, of course, I would say we had come to the next stage in our policy very conclusively. We were not prepared to pay very much. We would give lip service to the idea that political unity is so important that we will pay a lot for it, but we were prepared to pay considerably less, and so the balance was clearly shifting now.

I found the balance, the problems, primarily in two areas. One was agriculture. Very, very enormous—you're into billion dollars—of sales when you get to soybeans and corn products and wheat and all the other things, and we took a very strong line on this one —the strongest line I think the Commission had ever seen us—in saying we would be prepared to fight for our rights in GATT and anywhere else. and retaliate. So we had a new stage we had reached. And that went on all the way through my four years. In one area or another, it could be canned fruits and vegetables at one stage, and it was always

soybeans and wheat and corn products all the way through, because that's a couple of billion dollars right there and 800 million in something called corn gluten, which goes into animal feed.

In addition, we hit the real problem with steel, pipe and tube. We had rust belt places.

Q: These refer to the old industrial areas in the Midwest.

VEST: Like Pittsburgh, where we had the old aging steel plants that were no longer producing competitively with new efficient steel plants in Japan and Korea, Spain, and others that were coming on, plus some in Europe. So we had very, very serious differences there, because Europe had modern and old steel industry. We had modern and old steel industry.

So the other major thing that occupied a good hunk of the period was an extended steel negotiation, which was carried on primarily on our side. The agent back here was Mac Baldridge, the Secretary of Commerce, together with, from time to time, Bill Brock, the head of STR, Special Trade Representative. I was the agent over there primarily, and we were dealing with the European Commission, commissioner being Mr. D'Avignon.

We carried that through. It took us almost two years. We negotiated a pipe and tube agreement, which has governed, some would say restrictively, but others would say beneficially, the amount and flows of pipe and tube sales. It went into effect for five years, and will expire this September. And one of the newest problems which President Bush will have will be whether to extend that agreement, amend it, or cancel it, because, in the meantime, the pipe and tube industry has done very well. Industries have modernized. They are competitive. Not all of them, but enough. But there's just one real weak area.

But that was a wonderful negotiation. I've never had more fun, because each day I would be on the end of the line to Mac Baldridge—or to Bill Brock, usually to Mac—saying,

“Okay, now the Community moved this far. We've even brought the Italians into line with the Germans and the French.”

Or, at another time, I can remember I called him and I said, “We've got all these continental Europeans going along on this negotiation, but the British, still believing that they could play on that special relationship, have sent—and it's already headed over there—a special delegation headed by a deputy cabinet minister to try to see if they can't make a special side deal.” And there's a temptation on our part, if you can maybe divide and conquer, you concede, and there were always people back here who would say, “Let's try to divide them up.”

And here's where you get to your political thing. Our political thing is to encourage the evolution of a European Community, or a united Europe, at least, if you can, negotiate with them as an entity. So I called Baldridge and said, “The Brits are on their way. Please don't receive them, because then the whole crowd over here in Europe will fall to pieces.”

He was a wonderful guy to deal with. And he said, “Well, then what should I do?”

I said, “Just have your deputy Secretary of Commerce speak to their delegation, because theirs is headed by a deputy cabinet minister, and have him tell them that you can't agree to anything because you're negotiating with the European Community.” And they did, and we were able to carry on through. But we were back at that fundamental premise do you divide and conquer or do you pursue your known and definite interest, but do it with the European Community for your political. That's where we've stuck as a policy ever since.

Q: Do you think that in a way you were fortunate, because of these difficult negotiations, that you were representing the Reagan Administration, which did take a, you might say, harder nosed view of trade than one which was more manipulative. You know the Kissinger-Brzezinski real politic-type things.

VEST: I think you could do it, and one, I agree we were terribly lucky. Well, one of the Reagan Administration's deep-seated principles, was to try to maintain world trade and an open trading system and to avoid tariffs and avoid trade barriers. This is one of the ones President Reagan viscerally felt very strongly about, probably more viscerally so than any President in recent time and any that we could have had.

You add to that a guy like Baldridge, who had been a top big businessman himself, so he knew exactly what he was talking about. The combination meant we did have, I think, the ideal backing to carry through this negotiation. It was really very good. Better than—I hate to say, but I have to. If the Democrats had been in power with their tradition of being responsive to economic forces, we would not have been able to carry this through as well as we did.

Q: There are a tide sometimes where Nixon can open up to China, where a Democrat probably- -Humphrey probably—couldn't have gotten away with it.

VEST: And you probably would not have had anybody being as firm on the business of trying to avoid trade wars as we had in that moment in Reagan and Baldridge.

Q: Did you get involved in the pipeline business for gas? This was a major...

VEST: Yes, the gas pipeline. Oh.

Q: Can you explain what that was? It always struck me as being a fight we didn't need to get into.

VEST: Well, it certainly was true, and the wonderful part was that we had that same basic fight years before.

Q: Could you explain what it was?

VEST: Well, earlier on, the first one of these had been a proposal that the Soviets would build a pipeline that would ship oil, petroleum products, through to central Europe. And we in the West, or the United States especially, strongly opposed that saying the Europeans will be dependent on Soviet gasoline, oil products. We lost that one in the end. It was cheaper, so it was built. Europe was not dependent on the Soviet Union because it continued this stuff from all over the world still. By later times, it had it from the North Sea, as we all know.

This particular one was on natural gas, and they were proposing to build a big natural gas pipeline that would come all the way across the Soviet Union and into central Europe. We said, “Oh, no. You will be dependent on natural gas and city after city can be cut off, and we will not allow any of our subsidiaries, or any European company that has contracts as a result of deals with our subsidiaries, to provide any material for the building of that pipeline. We're opposed to it.” Which meant that there were a lot of European companies that had business arrangements with American companies and expertise and technology and so on, which we were saying, “You European companies can't do it, because there's been that much technology traded back and forth.”

Q: It's kind of trying to unscramble eggs.

VEST: We were saying, for example, to the French Government, “You French companies, we, American Government, are telling you, French companies, you may not bid anything on that contract.” And it created an enormous uproar, and I don't know anybody who was in Europe at the time, I don't know anybody at all, who didn't send back the message who didn't say it won't work. It simply won't work. The Europeans are not going to be ordered around by the United States Government, and that's what it is from their point of view.

Well, the Reagan Administration bulldozed ahead. The Europeans began to be more and more nasty. It was very, very badly received all over. I don't think we could have done anything to rouse local nationalism more than this. It also raised questions about whether

any European business should do anything with American business in the future, which had very large implications for American business with what lay down the way. And, in the middle of all this, people were telling Washington it isn't working.

Q: You were telling them, too?

VEST: I had done it. I know our ambassador to Belgium had done it. Our ambassador to Germany, a very, very respected elder statesman.

Q: Arthur Burns?

VEST: Arthur Burns had done it in spades and said, you know, how terribly wrong this is from the point of Germany. And, at that point, they changed Secretaries of State, and all by himself back over in Washington here, backed by Larry Eagleburger and Walter Stoessel and I don't know who else, Mr. Shultz just sort of turned that whole thing around, and we had conducted a magnificent retreat.

Q: Where was the impetus for this coming from? I mean, not the retreat, but the drive.

VEST: The drive, as far as I know, came out of what I'd call the conservative Republican world. You mustn't trust the Soviets; you mustn't ever be controllable in any way by the Soviets.

Q: In the worst case scenario of all that's happened.

VEST: In the worst case scenario, yes. Now, remember, in one sense there was a—and I used to argue this much at least with my friends in Europe—there is some basis for concern, because at the moment, the Europeans were intending to put all of their gas plans, or at least most of them, on that pipeline out of the Soviet Union. They could have been having some out of the North Sea. They could have had container gas from other places, and they weren't thinking through very carefully that maybe, by putting so many of their eggs in one basket, they weren't doing themselves a very good deal,

either economically or from a security point. A view in point of fact, over time Russian gas hasn't been that much of a bargain. So, you see, it hasn't worked out entirely the way they thought it would.

Q: Well, George, should we move on to your last job?

VEST: Sure.

Q: After dealing with these matters, you all of a sudden came back to take—I'm not sure. I would suspect it might have been a fine job as far as a job goes, but as far as the pressures on you, I can't think of a worse one—and that's Director General, at a particularly difficult time with the impact of a new Foreign Service act. And you were there from '85 to '89. You had extended your retirement. How did you get talked into that? [Chuckles]

VEST: It's really the simplest thing in the world. Mr. Shultz called and asked me to come back, and no one would tell me what it was. And he was a wonderful man, Mr. Shultz, and he called me into his office. I sat down, and he said, “George, I see that you are due to retire next year. Now I want you to know you have the following choices. If you want to retire next year, you can do so. I understand; you're entitled to it. If you want to stay on as ambassador longer in the Community—which was a very generous thing for him to do, which was being exceptional—if you want to stay on as ambassador to the Community, I will have you stay as long as you want, but I would like you to come back the beginning of next year to be the Director General, because it's suddenly fallen vacant.”

So naturally I said, “Yes, sir. I'll be back.” There was never any question about that. You know as well as I do that Foreign Service means service when you're asked to serve.

Q: I think you and I know, but we belong to a somewhat different generation. I think it's not quite as...

VEST: I think each generation learns it anew.

Q: I hope you're right.

VEST: I do. I think so. I really do. Each generation learns it anew, and it was easier for mine be cause my generation, many of us learned it in the war. That was service to begin with.

But, no, he asked, and so I was very, enormously flattered and very pleased to come back. I came back in February, and just left.

Q: February of '85?

VEST: '85. I just came back, and I didn't get confirmed by the Senate until June, but I just came back at once.

Q: Well, could you explain what the situation was at the time? In the first place, what basically the job of Director General is and then what was the particular problems that you were going to be faced with.

VEST: These come from the same origins. There was a new act passed, the new act of 1986 governing the Foreign Service. And in the course of that act, first of all, the act took all aspects of personnel—Foreign Service and Civil Service, worldwide and in the building, everything involving personnel—and put it under the immediate responsibility of the Director General. Prior to the act of 1986, the director general did not personally run personnel himself. He sat above it and did policy and very important assignments. But with that one, you had it from the nitty gritty from the bottom up, and the director general was responsible for everything from the advertising, examination, appointment, job assignments worldwide, discipline when things went wrong—it means firing people from time to time, or lesser discipline—promotion and recommending the senior most

choices where Foreign Service officers go. In other words, everything involving the Foreign Service.

That was on the one hand. Now in that same Foreign Service act was a second thing, which was entirely revolutionary for our Foreign Service. Before 1946, when you came into the Foreign Service, you could reasonably aspire to a lifetime career if you did a reasonable job.

Q: Up until about age 60, I think.

VEST: Age 60 to the early 60s. What that had done was, because of our normal niceness as Americans, we had never of come to terms with the fact that if you're going to maintain a Service, you're going to have to fire some people for being inefficient or acting improperly or doing it improperly or doing whatever, and we had not adequately applied this business of if you're at the bottom of your class, you should retire. And so we had far too many chiefs in relation to the Indians, in relation to the number of jobs to be filled. A great many. In fact, the year that I took over the job, there were over 200 senior officers who had no job of any kind to do and were drawing top senior salaries and just having coffee in the cafeteria and agitating, hoping they could find a job someday.

The new Foreign Service act instituted an up-or-out system, which set out to have a rational system related to the number of jobs to be filled in the Foreign Service, with a steady proportion of promotions and, at the senior levels, a certain number of people would be honorably retired under varying conditions which led to that retirement. This would mean that a certain number of people would be lost at various stages at the top, beginning primarily with some at the early 50s, some in the late 50s, and some in the early 60s. But in our senior group, there would be a significant number of people who would be asked to retire. Honorable retirement with all perquisites and allowances you'd normally get at such a time, a system which was comparable to the way in which captains in the Navy, colonels in the Army, who do not make general and admiral, are asked to retire.

In fact, frankly, a system which, if you looked larger, is increasingly applied in law firms, in colleges, those who get tenure and those who do not. I mean, the up-or-out system is largely a facet of our society today.

But we had never had it before. And a whole bunch of people had worked for years in the Foreign Service and were suddenly told, “This is applicable to you,” and they were outraged. They said, “You changed the rules in the middle of the game. We were misled as to whether we should compete for these senior slots.” Many things were said, and there was very, very deep-seated anger, agitation, unease, and a great many people were complaining and morale was very deeply affected by it. There was no question.

To put this into effect, it just happened that it would come into effect with significant numbers of people being asked to retire exactly during the period when I was going to be the director general. [Laughter] Its effectiveness came with my arrival.

Q: With friends like George Shultz, who needs enemies?

VEST: I had the dubious honor, and the not at all dubious pleasure, of putting this into effect, and we had many new things. People grieved and went to law, made lawsuits about this, and there were people who felt very upset about it, wives who were deeply offended. I mean, it was an extremely difficult period. I would have to say, however, as we went on through it, one, I had total backing from Secretary Shultz; and secondly—it meant even more important in one sense because it was a day-to-day thing—I had total backing from the Under Secretary of State, Ron Spiers, and without that kind of backing, it couldn't possibly have been done. If you're going to put in all new rules, try to do it as honestly and as compassionately as you can. You do have to do a lot of disagreeable things, and you're going to have to be backed so that people aren't going to try to undercut what you've done. And I was never undercut by either Secretary Shultz or Spiers, and every time I went to them, I was backed.

Q: Well, this is very good, because so often it's easy to do an end run and come around and, well, do that, but I've got my friend.

VEST: I have to say I never had an end run once. Never once in the four years did Mr. Shultz ever ask me to show any favoritism of any kind to anybody, and I know he had plenty of people approach him. And just once the Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Whitehead, edged up toward something like that and he said, “I have never asked before and I know it's rarely done.”

“But,” I said, “Mr. Shultz has never done it ever.”

Q: Before he had a chance to collect.

VEST: And Mr. Whitehead backed away. [Laughter]

Q: Were you getting pressures from the White House?

VEST: No, I didn't get pressures. I got inquiries from the Hill, plenty of inquires from staffers. Jesse Helms' staff was particularly critical, and I would have hour-long conversations with Senator Helms' staffers, who were not benignly motivated at all.

Q: What was the motivation, because they couldn't have had that many constituents? Senator Helms is from North Carolina and has played a sort of a—it's not quite gadflies, is too benign a term, but has been basically an avowed opponent of much of the Foreign Service for policy.

VEST: I don't know to what extent Senator Helms has been manipulated or how much he thinks himself. He may be what you would call a populist who thinks that the Foreign Service is an elitist, somewhat suspect, kind of crowd, and he may genuinely feel that way for all I know. However, I do know he had on his staff people who certainly played on his antipathy. One of whom was a former Foreign Service officer who had been a failure, one

of those few who had been a real failure in the Foreign Service and had been forced to retire, and he was extremely hostile to everything we did, for reasons that are personal and understandable.

Another member of his staff, whom I met with several times, was simply one of these unbelievably dyed-in-the-wool conservatives who, if you followed him down the track for an hour or two where he had argued why do you do this this way and why don't you do it that way, he would end up with the statement, “Well, I believe that the people in the Foreign Service should be chosen and be representative of the will of the nation. And they have elected a Republican President and we got a Republican Senate and the majority of each incoming class should be of valid Republicans.”

And I would say, “Well, we don't take anybody into the Foreign Service because of their politics.”

“Well, you should.” At the end, that's where he ended. It was very interesting.

But in the end, I would just have to say this. I got many inquiries from the Hill, and most of the inquiries were understandable. Because when someone who'd work for years credibly in the Foreign Service was told, “You have to retire,” you know, it's perfectly easy for somebody to say, “How did this come about?” So I had a pretty busy time constantly explaining, “It came about because you have a new act of 1986 which you have voted, and I'm implementing it as honestly as I can.”

Q: Do you happen to know off hand did Jesse Helms vote for the act?

VEST: I don't. I don't really know.

Q: Well, that was, of course, a major problem during your time. Another one that is a constant theme is the lack—and I guess it's true—of recruitment of minorities into the Foreign Service, and this would fall within your jurisdiction. How did you approach this?

VEST: There was never any question that we would like more minorities. I mean, there was a valid policy. We sent special recruiters to the historic black colleges. I wrote and sent material to the president of every single historical black college in the country, and I wrote the letter and signed it myself, not with a machine, but personally, and still we did not get as many as we'd like, even remotely. The number usually stuck around 6% of each incoming group.

I then personally, Stu, took the time off and went out and did the personal recruiting myself in California, starting at San Diego, the University of San Diego, going on up to Los Angeles, Pasadena, Stanford, Berkeley, and did them all. It took about two and a half weeks. Went to every college, met with the students, with the professors, with the heads of departments, with the black student clubs and the Hispanic clubs, which there are both through many of those places. And it was a very interesting experience, because there were plenty of people, minorities, who were interested and would listen, but what I found over and over again, was high quality minority students were offered such great jobs, either they were offered the job by IBM or offered scholarships to go to law schools or med schools or what have you, that the cream of the minority students simply, for understandable reasons, opted for something else.

Now I don't really know the answer to that. I do know that people argue about this, but I do know that we are not alone in this. There are just enough, at the moment, high quality minority students graduating from our colleges to fill all of the things that a now minority-conscience society is prepared to do things with.

Q: Let me stop right here.

[End Tape 3, Side 2] [Begin Tape 4, Side 1]

Q: . . . my time in the Foreign Service and all is that, even when we do recruit, there's a tendency to get somebody to give often an equivalent to a special grade on the test or say,

“All right, because you are either Hispanic or black, you get a special edge on the exam.” But yet, once they're brought in, they're sort of dumped into the general group to perform as Foreign Service officers. I mean, logic would say when you have a highly selective crew and you bring people in under a different and obviously lesser standard, the odds are you've got a problem.

VEST: You haven't helped the individual.

Q: No, you haven't.

VEST: And you've disadvantaged the Service. That was a program that was in effect when I came in as Director General of the Foreign Service. It was a special program to bring in minorities at the mid grade, and it was for minorities and women. And when I took over this job, in the first year I amended the program entirely. First, we made it no longer applicable to women, because enough women were coming in by the regular exam basis throughout. On minorities, I said we will still have a minority entry program, but we are going to do something that we have not done before. We are going to have a very careful and thorough type of examination which any mid- level minority applicant must go through. And we are going to watch their assignments and performance for two successive assignments so that they get properly looked at.

Now the reason for that was, when I looked into the previous mid-level minority group that we brought into the Foreign Service, I found two major defects. A certain number of them must have looked all right superficially, but quickly turned out not to be really satisfactory and they were at a disadvantage.

Q: I think that's part of the phenomenon and something which isn't really spoken about, but you know there's what is equivalent to a black degree. The universities, business, everybody is making special things.

VEST: Well, in this case, they didn't have to take a written exam. They came in.

Q: So they came in looking good, but for a part of this...

VEST: Then we had a problem. The other half of that problem, though, lay in the fact, I discovered when I talked to as many of them as I could every time they came through town, I found a certain number of very highly qualified people who simply were impossibly badly assigned. A guy who'd run a bank in the Philippines—and he had run the bank, a branch bank in the Philippines for an American firm—was put for two successive times issuing visas in a remote visa mill. Not a big one, but a little one, and he was fed up. He said, “I'm not going on to do this kind of thing indefinitely,” and he quit. Well, I don't blame him. He's dead right.

So what we do, or did when I instituted it, we very much reduced the program. We said no more for women. We will aim to get, if we can, six to ten high-grade applicants a year. We will run them through an oral exam, just like the oral exam that we give to people who have entered the Foreign Service. In fact, we will put them in with a class that's going through so that nobody knows they're not the same. You see what I'm getting at?

Q: Yes.

VEST: And at the end of that, we have the second phase which we do which is called the in basket challenge which they go through, and they would do that. In other words, they skipped the written exam, but they got run through just like everybody else. But there was one extra thing. I saw to it that my minority counselor, who I had in personnel, was a very, very able...

Q: Who was that?

VEST: A black woman, Stephanie Gillespie. I saw to it that she was able to sit on every board where one of these was going through so that no one could ever say that we were disadvantaging them, because Stephanie was one of those immensely intelligent people whose first feeling would be, “I want to be properly represented by my minority

compatriots.” And the result is a number of them first of all were selected, looked great. One who had a Ph.D. and had had a job for a while in AID simply did not pass, and it was so close that I said, “Okay. Later we'll give her one more chance.” She didn't pass it the second time, so she simply did not get hired. There are enough other factors.

Q: It's hard to do it, but it's what you have to do to have a better system.

VEST: We have ended up not being able to get ten that we were totally comfortable with. We had about, last year, we had six or eight, but we have done that to continue to try to get highly—we have some very remarkable people who come in by it. One or two I think are really terrific. It's a very, very limited window and I think one that does not disadvantage the Service and does not penalize the officer. But I've accepted the fact that, when you bring them in, you have to watch at least two assignments to make sure that these people who are disadvantaged because they're coming in—they don't come in at the two level, they come in at the three level. So it's not very high above, but still, it's a little higher, and they know they have some catch up to do. Anyway, I think we found a balance, and it's working I think now. And I don't believe we're bringing in handicapped people or treating them badly. I think we're doing it right.

Q: Well, George, there's another one that has been—you inherited part of it, but it had been going on for a long time— and that is the assignment of women, particularly as you get farther up. Specifically, one of the areas where there's been even a court case saying that women were not being appointed in proportionate numbers to being DCMs. In the time you were there, how did you handle this?

VEST: Well, we frankly faced that, because I would be blunt to say my predecessors, for various reasons—this is where EEO really has meaning.

Q: The EEO being the Equal Opportunity Office.

VEST: Yes. We had not appointed many senior women officers to DCMs. I can tell you, when I was assistant secretary for European affairs, where we had a large number of political appointee ambassadors, they would come in and talk to me and they would say, “Now we would like your advice as to who we could consider for a DCM.” And I would give them some names, and they would almost invariably say, “No, we're not interested in any women officers. Our wives have never been the wife of an ambassador. They're going to need help. We want a married DCM.” I mean, that's very straight forward.

I can tell you in the more recent time, I know our ambassador to Paris looked at two officers, both of them very, very good. No question about it. I know both of them and they really were first-class. One's married, the other was divorced, and the ambassador was very frank with me. He said, “Well, we need help, so I'm taking the one who's married.” And this is part of it, and a big part of it, but not all of it.

What we did do about it, we ran something which is simply called the DCM committee, and we ran it very seriously. The DCM committee I chaired, and on it sat the under secretary for management, the under secretary for political affairs and my head of personnel as the recording scribe. For every DCM position that came up, we got recommendations from the bureau, from the bureau of personnel, if need be from the bureau of economic affairs, wherever, from the desk officer. But then we, as a committee, picked who we considered to be eligible to be put on a list to be made available to the ambassador. And, occasionally, we had a list in which it was very clear that the woman officer was far and away the best officer. Now there was no question about this. We were deliberately setting out to try to move senior women officers into that world, give them the responsibility.

It began to catch on. We have had most recently a woman DCM in South Africa, no small place to have such a thing. We've had them in Haiti, we've had them in other places. It's begun to be accepted in the trade. One, we've had more good women officers at the senior levels and nobody questions it, and they speak the language and they've had the experience. When you're doing something like that, people begin to accept it. And frankly,

where the Foreign Service ambassadors, I have called them in and I've just said frankly, “Look.”

Q: Take the Foreign Service ambassador.

VEST: Foreign Service officers. I've called them in and I would say, “Look, you're going to this country. The DCM committee has met and we would very, very strongly like you to accept as your DCM such and such officer. Now we wouldn't do this if we didn't think she was terrific. Look into the record yourself and see if you don't think she'd do a darn good job as your DCM.” And by and large, we've began to get a response to it.

Q: I mean, everybody reads the tea leaves. When push comes to shove, you'd rather have a good person than a not so good person.

VEST: And also, most career Foreign Service officers, by the time they become ambassador, they or their wives do not need a DCM's wife necessarily to do these things.

But anyway, we have begun to make real headway, and I think it's now an accepted fact. I believe that the wide open choice of women in all the senior jobs is something that, with the kind of class of wonderful women we're getting now as officers, that the next four to five years will see that just become a sort of a normal part.

Q: The pump has been primed.

VEST: I think the pump has been primed. I'm very happy about our women offices. I think they're wonderful. Roz Ridgway is a symbol of what's to come.

Q: Well, George, the last question on this. You were the director of personnel, but you also had the White House political appointments. How did this play in your office, political appointees?

VEST: Let me just say that to the extent I got involved in it, which meant from time to time I accompanied the Deputy Secretary of State when this was discussed over in the White House. Generally speaking, you get a pretty clear picture beforehand as to whether or not the White House is adamantly going to send a politico, but we'd go over and discuss it and sometimes it went back and forth one way or the other.

At my level, I've been through two administrations. The Reagan Administration, the conversations over there were among the most humiliating and insulting which I've ever been through. I mean, they did not care at all about anything but what they could do in the political sense about their own political crowd. We sent one of our really good black officer's name over three times for an embassy, and each time they sent a political appointee of relatively poor value to take those posts. It shows you how little they cared. They were about the most maladroit people you could have.

One lovely one—I won't use any names so I don't think it will hurt anybody—but the post fell vacant. It was a wonderful episode. On a Tuesday, I got a telephone call from the ambassador in this particular post, and he said, “George, I'm tired of being an ambassador. This is not the fun I thought it was. I'm going back to my business in California.”

I said, “Well, fine. Send in a telegram and a resignation, and we'll send you orders and all the rest.”

He said, “Oh, I don't need any of that. I've already got my tickets, and I'm leaving on Saturday.” So he left, and that is when I looked around. I thought we had a nice post for this black Foreign Service officer. Back came the White House saying, “No. Mrs. Reagan has a friend who is a- -one of the people who work on your toes—podiatrist. Has a friend who's a podiatrist out in San Francisco, and she would like him to have this post. So we had to process it.

When the security things came in, the security people had done it and they tried to be as polite about it as they could, but they said that his key group of friends in San Francisco were a group of transvestites, and they didn't know how well that would go down in this particular country. And I've nothing against transvestites, but most countries don't welcome that kind of thing too casually. So the question was, “What should we do about this?” so I asked the seventh floor, “What should we do about this?” and the seventh floor said, “We think you should bury it and never follow it through.”

So we would periodically get inquiries from this podiatrist in San Francisco, but we never really managed to process the thing, and the Reagan Administration left and that was the end of that. But, no, they were crass. These were people who later ended up in court or in jail. They didn't know how to pick their people. If they'd, you know, given some money, that's all that mattered.

On the other hand, then came the Bush crowd, very clearly going to do something for their team. And they put forward quite a lot of people, but I would have to say they didn't seem to have as many oddballs and they were very considerate in the way we talked things out. I didn't get any insults. I mean, the conversations with the Reagan White House were simply, by my standards, insulting, and out of the Bush Administration, it was not insulting. It was a straight forward fact we're going to do this many. We're not going to hang on to the last administration. As time goes on, as the administration goes on, unlike the Reagan Administration which tried to increase the percentage over eight years, the Bush people made it very clear we aim to repay the original group, but reduce over time the number of political appointees. And, further, if by putting in a political appointee, we're disposing a Foreign Service ambassador, you let us know because we'll ensure he gets another assignment somewhere. And by and large, they were doing that. So there was a gentlemanly quality and less offensive, is the only way I could describe it. [Laughter]

Q: Well, I think it's the right term.

Well, George, I've kept you here. My God, we've been going since 9:30 and it's now 3:02. We usually end up these interview with two questions. One, I think this would be a very hard one for you to answer, but looking back on your career, what gave you the greatest satisfaction? You've had a lot of high points.

VEST: No one thing gave me the greatest satisfaction other than the large, general thing. It sounds trite, but I just have to say it. I never really cared about money, and I never really cared about rank or distinction. I never thought I was going to get past old FS-03. For me, it was just all the way through a very exciting, rewarding thing to serve your country and do something that you thought was worth doing. And, sure there's some flat stages, but mostly you conclude...

Q: Your Hamilton, Bermuda. [Laughter]

VEST: Even the Hamilton, Bermuda had one bright reward, but I left. All those people who didn't speak to each other got together and came together at the woman vice consul's house and had drinks—it was the only time in year and a half I was there they were ever together—to say goodbye to Emily and me, because we had made friends with all of them. That was an achievement for us. But I felt I was serving my country, and that was it. There was no special anything else.

Q: The last question we ask, and this is certainly maybe an obvious question to ask somebody you only less than a year ago was our chief recruiter, but we ask everybody. If a young person came to you and said, "Mr. Ambassador, what do you think about the Foreign Service as a career for me?" How would you reply?

VEST: I will reply to this, because I've had it happen a lot.

Q: Yes, I'm sure you have. [Laughter]

VEST: Because I don't automatically say, “Oh, yes. Go into the Foreign Service.” I normally have tried to say, “Look. The Foreign Service is one of the most extraordinary, rewarding, frustrating, and difficult careers you can get into. You need to think carefully what you're getting into, what you and your wife are getting into, because if you're married, the Foreign Service asks demands of the whole family.”

Q: Or the spouse, you might also say.

VEST: Or spouse. You would say spouse today. And I would say, do say, “I think it's, for me, it was one of the most exciting, rewarding careers I could ever have asked for. I know all the downside. I don't think the downsides should deter you. I think you should, however, carefully know yourself. What is it you want to do? How is it you want to live? What are your values? What do you value? If fundamentally you really want to make money, you shouldn't go into the Foreign Service, you ought to go into law or do some of these other things. Foreign Service is a very special kind of group, but people are going to tell you, 'Okay, it's got all kinds of crooks, I mean, funny sides to it. You can never get ahead if you don't have money or you didn't go to an ivy league school.' I would just say all of those are phonies. They are not true. Any American can rise to anything in this Foreign Service if he has the quality and the luck. You have to have the quality to take advantage of the luck.”

Q: And to know when the windows of opportunity are open. Sometimes people get too clever and they don't understand.

VEST: I have remained very enthusiastic. I consider, particularly in the world of today where more and more people are trying to think what is it that matters. There is another generation that's come after the yuppie generation. There's another bunch of young people who are saying, “I want to do something that matters in my life.” Well, the Foreign Service matters.

Q: Well, George, I want to thank you very much.

End of interview